4

天上旋律

氷結鏡界のエデン

細音 啓
KEI SAZANE

ファンタジア文庫

細音啓
●さざねけい

『黄昏色の詠使い　イヴは夜明けに微笑んで』で第18回ファンタジア長編小説大賞佳作を受賞。同作でデビュー。東京に限りなく近い神奈川の端っこでこっそり生息する兼業作家。ここ数ヶ月、昼間のお仕事に忙殺される毎日を送ってます。ああ、一日が30時間あればゆっくり休めるのに。……うん、そんなこと考える間に仕事してきます（涙）

イラスト：カスカベアキラ
カバーデザイン：カマベヨシヒコ（ZEN）

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天上旋律
氷結鏡界のエデン4

細音啓

ファンタジア文庫

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富士見書房

氷結鏡界のエデン4
天上旋律

「守るんじゃなく、一緒に戦う。……それが僕の新しい戦い方だから」

仲間と挑んだ選抜戦で、シェルティスは新たな決意を迫られる。

統政庁との会合に赴く巫女・ユミィの護衛任務。それを勝ち取るため、モニカと華宮、そして「四人目」の仲間と部隊戦に参加したシェルティスは、一人で戦ってきた己の弱点と向き合うことになる。

時を同じくして、シェルティスに宿る魔笛を浄化するため沁力の修行を重ねるユミィの前に、ツァリと名乗る女性が現れた。

「沁力が開花するキッカケ――お前の知らない旋律を与えてやろう」

そう告げる彼女は、ユミィを『ある場所』へ誘うのだが……。

変革する世界で、少年を想い少女が歌う、重層世界ファンタジー。

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氷結鏡界のエデン4

天上旋律

細音啓

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氷結鏡界のエデン4
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氷結鏡界のエデン4

天上旋律

細音 啓

ファンタジア文庫

1683

「よぉ黒毛玉、てめぇに一つだけ忠告だ。
――人間の本気をなめるなよ？」

「僕とお前は何ひとつ変わらないのかもしれない。
僕に人間が何だとか言う資格なんてないのかもしれない。だけど――」

「それではシェルティス。
統政庁（とうせいちょう）で待っていますから」

「わたしは……人間（ひと）は、
この怪物に勝てない。
……でも」

「あの侵攻者（しんこうしゃ）たちに、
人間の本気を見せてあげましょう」

「始まりは千年前の楽園幻想。
――氷結鏡界が結ばれる前の世界を見た時、
お前はどんな想いを抱く？」

氷結鏡界のエデン

4

天上旋律

皇姫を頂点とする天結宮における階級図

皇姫サラ
Salah

沁力による氷結鏡界を
司る存在

氷結鏡界の巫女たち

巫女の2位
メイメル・イン・カーネイション
Meimel in Carnation

結界系の沁力を
得意とする先輩巫女

巫女の4位
春蕾・ピア・ヌクレネン
Syun-rei Pia Nucclene

領域系の沁力を
得意とする、か弱き少女

巫女の専属護衛・千年獅

メイメルの千年獅
爛
Run

拳闘士。千年獅との
組み手が趣味

春蕾の千年獅
レオン・ネストリウス・オーヴァ
Leon Nestorius Ova

シェルティスの
旧友である大剣使い

千年獅の卵・護士候補生

モニカ・イスペラント
Monica Esperanto

巫女候補生だった過去を
持つ。シェルティスの
友人にして部隊長

華宮
Kagura

研究者の顔をあわせもつ、
シェルティスたちの
部隊仲間。
ネルの民と呼ばれる
獣耳族の亜人。

巫女の5位

ユミィ・エル・スフレニクトール
Ymy Ele Soufflenictole

洗礼系の沁力を得意とする
優しい少女。シェルティスの
幼なじみであり、
現在は専属護衛をもたない

必ずたどり着く。
——君の待つ場所へ。

Story & Characters

【あらすじ&登場人物紹介】

異端の少年／護士候補生

シェルティス・マグナ・イール
Sheltis Magna Yehle

双剣使いの少年。
穢歌の庭に落下したことで、
禁断の呪力・魔笛(まてき)を
その身に宿した

幽幻種と呼ばれる存在に侵攻を受ける世界。巫女の祈る守護結界に守られた浮遊大陸オービエ・クレアでのみ、人は生きることができた。

大陸の外――穢歌の庭(エデン)に堕ち、禁断の呪力を宿したシェルティス。彼はその秘密を抱えたまま、幼なじみの巫女・ユミィの専属護衛・千年獅を目指し、護士候補生・モニカと共に部隊を結成する。部隊に新しく華宮を迎えるのと時を同じくして、護士の部隊が壊滅する事件が発生。華宮のサポートにより、シェルティスは事件の黒幕『黄金のマハ』を撃退する。しかし『マハ』たちの目的は謎のままで……。

Prologue

“Monica-senpai……are you really quitting as an apprentice Priestess?”

The room with all personal items completely removed. Only silence filled the desolate space.

Two girls stared at each other. Each of them was wearing a plain vestment.

“Senpai, why didn’t you tell me!?”

The girl with an innocent and adorable face raised her voice. Her jade eyes were teary and her long, off-gold hair reflected the ceiling lighting dazzlingly.

“……It’s true, isn’t it?”

“……”

Contrasting that was the girl with sakura-colored hair tied into one lock who wasn’t saying anything.

With her slim and petite body, her apparent age was in the mid-teens. Contrasting with her dignified and calm face, her bluish grey eyes housed loneliness somewhere within them.

“Why……didn’t you tell me?”

“It’s not like I haven’t told anyone. It’s just……that I didn’t tell you.”

Unable to bear her kouhai’s accusatory gaze, Monica turned her face away.

“I’ve made it to the last test for a Priestess. I have no regrets already. So I thought I’d end it off here.”

A Priestess — the girls that protect the barrier of this floating continent. Employing the use of miracle wavelength called Shinryoku, there were only three of these rare arts users.

For the sake of becoming the fourth, Monica had been practicing as an apprentice Priestess for a long time.

From the age of seven when she became an apprentice Priestess to fifteen years old, it had been nine years. She had been frozen in ice while alive and sunk to the bottom of a deep body of water. While undergoing that cruel training that bordered on lunacy, her Shinryoku developed.

She lasted until the final test……but Monica didn’t become a Priestess.

“It’s a relief for you. An apprentice Priestess like me leaving means that you have one less rival.”

“……Senpai.”

“I know, I’m joking. ……But I’m sorry. I was just teasing.”

Consoling Ymy who was staring at her wordlessly, she urged her towards a chair. Shall we sit and talk? —But the kouhai paid no attention to that.

“U, um……Monica-senpai. I think if it’s you, you can definitely become a Prelate! Since an apprentice Priestess that can reach the final test is rare.”

“Teaching the newly enrolled apprentice Priestesses the basics of Shinryoku, that instructor job?”

“Y-yes!”

Looking happy, Ymy nodded un, un with sparkling eyes.

“With that, you don’t have to move out of this room……I want to learn more from senpai just like until now.”

In contrast to that kouhai.

Monica quietly told her with her grey eyes downcast.

“I think I already have nothing left to teach you. The rest depends on you.”

“……That can’t be.”

“It’s not like I’m being cold. It just means that you’ve progressed. I’m praising you.”

This time, Ymy hung her head with a dejected expression.

“……You’re really going, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, it’s something I decided before taking the final test. That if it wasn’t good enough, it can’t be helped.”

“We can’t……meet again?”

She would cease to be an apprentice Priestess. That meant that she would vacate this room and leave the tower.

Usually that would be the case, however—

“That’s not the case.”

“Eh?”

“We might meet in an unexpected place, you know?”

“……That,”

What do you mean — Ymy who wanted to say those words was cut off,

“See you, Ymy, I’ll be cheering you on to becoming an outstanding Priestess.”

Placing the baggage at her feet on her shoulder, Monica waved to her kouhai.

And then three years later.

At this time, these two had no idea that they would happen across each other at the tower once more.

Chapter 1 – As Much as a Wish

Part 1

Located in the center of the floating continent, a tower so large it pierces the heavens — Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>.

With two hundred ninety one floors and a height of two thousand metres, it was the largest structure on the floating continent. The pure white tower that extended into the azure sky, creating a beautiful contrast between blue and white which could be seen from the distant living sector.

On the 11th floor of that tower, in a corner of the Cadet lodging.

“No, no, I’ve already said I don’t know anything. I mean it.”

Unique reddish brown hair and on top of that, the eyes of the same color but slightly stronger. A seventeen-year-old boy with a slim body suited to a teenage boy and balanced figure wearing a black jacket.

“Don’t lie. There’s no way you don’t know, being the person himself.”

“……Please spare me.”

In an enjoyment space at a corner of the floor. [T/N: It uses 団欒 which is for when people sit in a circle or a gathering of friends for fun. It might be talking about how the table is round (I don't know if it is)? The "space" is written directly in katakana, so I'm keeping it despite how strange it sounds.]

He dipped his head and sighed without thinking at the table there.

“Say, Kagura, I’m already sleepy. ……It’s already four in the morning; isn’t this becoming an all-nighter barrage of questioning?”

“There is no problem, the sun won’t rise for a few hours.”

Answering without delay, Kagura sat in the chair opposite him.

She wore a mechanical helmet that had an eye shield that fell below her eyes. [T/N: I'm using the kanji for mechanical helmet. The katakana just says "メット" which is simply "helmet". I think it's too vague...]

Her ears, which were longer and more pointy than those of humans, were of the [Nell Folk], and she had an impressive, intellectual manner of speaking that mismatched with her youthful appearance.

“I’m not tired?”

“That’s because your Carcadian rhythm is out of sync with mine by half a day. Normally people sleep at night and wake up in the morning, so if somebody doesn’t sleep at night, he or she will be tired.” [T/N: Carcadian Rhythm: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Circadian_rhythm. Any biological process with an oscillation of roughly 24 hours. That just means it repeats over 24 hours.]

“It’s fine. Rather than that, I can’t help but be interested in the Garden of Corrupted Song <Eden>, so tell me about it.”

“……It’s as I said before.”

Rubbing his eyes that were drooping from drowsiness, Sheltis leaked a breath out.

—Though he did know how Kagura felt.

—But he truly did not remember.

The Garden of Corrupted Song <Eden> which lay ten thousand metres below the floating continent. Brimming with thick miasma and foul water, it was the habitat of the Yuugenshu that repeatedly invaded.

“But three years ago, you fell into the Garden of Corrupted Song <Eden>, did you not?”

“It looks like I passed out from the impact. ……Though I just thought of that now.”

The dual swords user that fell into the Garden of Corrupted Song <Eden> three years ago at the age of fourteen was Sheltis.

Tenketsu Palace <Sophia> had listed him publicly as KIA, but that the boy had lived to return to the floating continent and that he had lost the Shinryoku that people are endowed with in exchange for the exact opposite — the same Mateki as the Yuugenshu, even within this tower there were few that knew.

“Fumu, fumu, well, it’s a miracle you’re even alive.”

Machine Pearl <Machina> — the girl nodded as she typed something into this personal-use computer. [T/N: The "computer" is the katakana to 演算機 which means "processor". They don't seem different enough to warrant writing processor <Computer>. And that sounds stupid. Also, I'm keeping it as machine pearl even though the more common translation for the kanji is a sphere or orb. Anybody who really cares, DEAL WITH IT.]

“You’re quite the vigorous pursuer.”

“That’s because I am half Cadet Guard and half researcher.”

The handful of those who knew that Sheltis had fallen into the Garden of Corrupted Song <Eden>.

Kagura was one of those few people. No, she also intended to hide that secret. A few days ago when they had battled the powerful Shinryoku practitioned called ‘Golden’ Maha, he had used Mateki in order to save her which led to her coming to know of it.

“But I am truly deeply interested in it. I never thought there was a survivor of the Garden of Corrupted Song <Eden> and that he would house Mateki within himself. It would cause quite a commotion if it were to become publicly known.”

“If you know that, then—”

“It’s fine. I won’t tell anybody else that you carry Mateki.”

She smiled beneath her mechanical helmet.

……Isn’t she a lot more open than before?

The Nell were an openly wary race. When he had first Kagura who descended from that lineage, she had been wary of him and even been openly hostile. That had improved as a result of the battle with Maha; it could be considered great progress as she even showed him her smile.

“Of course, that also includes Monica, right?”

“……I’m seriously requesting that.”

“Yes. Well, putting that aside, it’s about what the question just before but……I see, it can’t be helped if you can’t remember.”

Kagura regretfully drooped her shoulders.

“Right?”

“But it’s a pity. Somehow……mm? That’s right, it might work if I just ask your body directly.”

“……My body?”

“Yes. I’ll administer sleeping medication and run a CT scan on the entirety of your head. After that, I’ll commence surgery at the operation room. It might work if I attach electrodes to your brain and forcibly stimulate your brain cells.”

“That’s scary!?”

He jumped backwards without thinking while still seated.

“It’s decided! Go on a date with me next time, Sheltis. We’ll meet at this tower’s clinic’s entrance, go around to the X-ray and MRI scan rooms and end off at the emergency surgical room!”

“What kind of date plan is that!? Or rather, what do you plan to do to me!?”

“Don’t worry, it won’t hurt, you know? I’ll be gentle since it’s your first time?”

“That’s why I’m asking what you plan to do!?”

“No need to worry. I was just joking a little.”

“……Don’t mislead people.” [T/N: It says "false alarm" but that doesn't seem to go in well.]

She placed the teacup that was on the table to her lips,

“But there aren’t many people I can joke with like this, you know? You could even count how many of them are within Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>.”

“……Are those words of praise? Should I be glad?”

“Yes. Looking at it like this, I’m also looking forward to doing my best with the rest of the guards. I’m also a researcher from the Tower Control Bureau, so I haven’t truly experienced anything with the entire force. Of course, I know we’re not playing around but I’m still looking forward to it.”

……Looking forward to it, huh.

Supporting the teacup with both hands, Kagura's tone matched her words as she seemed a little happier and livelier.

"How about you, Sheltis? As a former Elite Guard."

"Things that I enjoyed……probably not much."

"Elite guards are Sennenshi candidates. As a result, the responsibility they shoulder is also great."

"That's also true, but that's not all."

He rested his head on one hand above the table as he stared into space.

"At any rate, three years ago I strongly felt that 'I have to become a Sennenshi even a day sooner'. That's why apart from Leon, I had nobody I was especially friendly with."

"You were rushing?"

"Yeah, thinking back on it, that's how it was."

"Fu—n. Why?"

"Eh. Well, Y……"

Ymy was waiting — he frantically closed his mouth that was about to say that.

"N-n-n-n-no reason, you know?"

"……How suspicious of you to falter right there. Ah, don't avert your eyes!"

"Hey, Kagura, how about another cup of tea?"

"You won't trick me, what's the rest after "yu"!"

"Yu……Yu-Yuto asked me to do something."

"Yuto? Ahh, that young girl that's been coming and going from Tenketsu Palace <Sophia> with Eyriey lately. Wait, you won't fool me! If you won't tell me, I'll reveal your secret to Monica."

"That's dirty!?"

"Come on now, if you don't say it quickly, I'll tell Monica—"

"What's this about me?"

The figure of a person patted Kagura's shoulder.

"Talking in such a loud voice so early in the morning, and what's more, yelling out my name."

Her vivid sakura-colored hair seemed to shine against her pure white ritual clothes. It was a girl with a dignified aura whose crossed rods <Rosario> were fastened at her waist.

“Ah, good morning, Monica.”

“Kagura and Sheltis, you two are up early as well. There’s still one hour before early morning training.”

“Good morning……actually, for me, rather than waking up, I haven’t even slept yet.”

He greeted Monica, who was tilting her head, with a shrug. Looking at his condition, she seemed to have sensed something as she smiled wryly.

“You’ve been caught by Kagura’s barrage of questioning, haven’t you.”

“You realized?”

“I’ve been through the same thing many times. You just have to wait until her curiosity has been sated.”

Monica put a coin into the meal dispenser beside the enjoyment space.

A bread in packaging came out of the left box and from the water heater in the right box came a teacup which was then filled with coffee.

“What are you two doing for breakfast?”

“Sheltis and I have also bought sandwiches from there. By the way, Sheltis chose hot milk and I had black tea.”

A sweet fragrance was still wafting from the teacup of Kagura who answered with that.

“In Kagura’s case, it’s dinner, right?”

“You could say that. Having dinner while watching the morning sun is also nice.”

Kagura added sugar to her teacup as she answered. She added one, two, three……and when it came to the fifth scoop.

“Kagura, what are you doing?”

“You ask strange things, Sheltis. Black tea is something you drink, isn’t it?”

“Well……the sugar’s not dissolving in anymore. I seem to recall you also putting in a mountain of honey just before, but you’re still adding more?”

Sheltis pointed at the black tea which had metamorphosed into a syrupy sludge.

“Rather than calling that black tea, it’s more appropriate to say it’s a black tea-like sugar lump. Can you really drink that? Or rather, is it even okay for a human to put that in their mouth?”

“Sugar is a necessary requirement for the brain’s functionality, after all. I drink this ten times a day.”

“Geh……my tongue feels numb just from imagining it.”

“I’m a thinker, so it’s fine. By the way, Monica, what’s the status on the new unit?”

“It was accepted yesterday. It seems the unit’s activities will also begin today.”

Monica stacked her coffee cup on top of her plate with a clack.

“Sheltis, how’s your condition?”

“Thanks to you, I seem fine.”

He had sustained an injury at the floating archipelago <Lagoon> and grown weary from the harsh battle with ‘Golden’ Maha. He had abused his body in succession, but spent the last few days here resting.

“There’s some reason you’re asking about my condition.”

“Yeah. I wanted to immediately go and take on a mission from the Merit System. We’ll also be able to improve the unit’s teamwork in actual combat.”

“A mission……was there some interesting reward?”

“We’ll search for that as well. I’ll explain, so just wait until I finish drinking this.”

Monica placed the coffee cup to her mouth again.

And Kagura’s expression under the mechanical helmet distorted.

“I can’t believe it no matter how many times I see it. How can you drink that without sugar, Monica; I can’t think of it as something sane to be ingesting that bitter liquid without adding anything.”

Seeing Kagura’s actions, Monica turned to Sheltis with a deeply meaningful look.

“It’s that. How about you, Sheltis?”

“Yeah. I think that’s how it is for me too.”

“That? What’s this about you two?”

Sheltis and Monica answered together in response to Kagura who was tilting her head with a serious expression.

“It’s because somebody’s a child.”

Part 2

Floor 21 of Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>, Organization Terminal Space.

One side of this enormous floor was covered entirely by a line of completely new computers.

The Merit System — in order for Sheltis’ group to be promoted from Cadet Guards into Regular Guards, they had to complete a certain number of missions from Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>. This was a specialized terminal for the purpose of accepting those missions.

“Come now, Kagura, don’t pout.”

“Wh-who’s pouting! E-even I can……drink coffee without sugar.”

“Yes, yes. It’s best to not force yourself and just drink what you like.”

Pacifying Kagura who was puffing her cheeks, he sat her down in front of the computer. Of the three of them — rather, even out of all of Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>’s members, there were none who surpassed Kagura in handling machinery. It would be for the best if they left this terminal to Kagura as well.

“Then I shall start searching. Monica, tell me your preferred mission conditions.”

Starting with defending, a great diversity of missions from the General Affairs Bureau, the Tower Control Bureau, the Environmental Bureau and others came up. From VIP escorts to investigations into the floating archipelago <Lagoon>, to harmful beast extermination and nightly tower defense. They varied in their difficulties and durations, and more than that, the merit points were spread thin amongst them.

One would have to save a set amount of those points to have the right to challenge becoming a Regular Guard.

“……The first one is a simple thing, after all.”

Monica nodded with her fingertip upon her lip.

“Well then, let’s search starting from ones that end in a few days. The time period is anything from tomorrow and after.”

Kagura’s slender fingers danced over the terminal’s keys as she typed.

“Take a look at this one.”

The girl pointed at the display.

‘ Mission Number 58. ‘Tower Patrol’

Subject ‘Defense’, Destination ‘None’, Duration ’2 days’, Recruits ‘Fifth Unit’ ‘

It was a nightly defense patrol of Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>’s premises.

With the low difficulty, one couldn’t expect many merit points, but it was just right for them to warm up as a new unit. It ending in short time was also favorable.

“I don’t think it’s bad but what about you, Monica?”

“It seems good. There’s still a lot of room left in the recruitments though, so we should look at other missions before deciding.”

“Yes, then we’ll add the additional constraint of ‘outside the tower’.”

‘ Mission number 81. ‘Harmful Beast Extermination’

Subject ‘Subjugation’, Destination ‘Nature District, Eastern Area’, Duration ’1 day’, Recruits ‘Second Unit’ ‘

“Ah, this one might be bad.”

To inform the other two, he crossed his arms into an X shape.

“Why? Harmful beast extermination is a typical mission.”

“This here, the duration period of one day smells fishy. The nature district is more than a hundred kilometres away from here, but doing a round trip and defeating a beast in one day……it’s a pretty difficult time limit. Which means this is probably an emergency.”

There may have been a large outbreak of beasts in the nature district or something large and dangerous like a dragon species may have appeared.

Either way, it was a mission with a high degree of danger.

“……It’s dangerous for a new unit, huh.”

“There’s also that, but you said it yourself, Monica, that we’d be forging our teamwork while undertaking a mission. This won’t suit that, I think. Leaving for the nature district and coming back all in a big rush won’t allow us to deepen our bonds, right?”

“I, I see……a unit leader needs to think that far.”

The new unit leader nodded with a face that seemed impressed and directing a piercing gaze at the screen.

“Kagura, sorry but please bring up the mission before this.”

“Yes. We’re applying for this one, I suspect. I’ll immedi……mm?”

Kagura’s fingers that had been typing came to a halt.

“What is it?”

“The terminal’s memory changed abnormally……it’s being monitored remotely from another terminal.”

The mouth peeking out from underneath the mechanical helmet stiffened into a line. While he was thinking about that, she suddenly stood up and turned on the computer next to them.

“……This terminal is normal. That means it’s not a system for monitoring the entirety of the defense force. That means we can assume that it’s for monitoring one of our unit member codes.”

There was no unrest in Kagura who was continuing smoothly.

“Is that dangerous?”

“No, it’s most likely an instructor. It’s a commonly used method of confirming our mission statuses. I’m going to ignore it and apply for the mission from just now, but are you fine with that?”

Just when Kagura was about to pull up the screen once again.

Sheltis’ card-type badge that was at the breast of his jacket began vibrating.

“A call?”

“It seems like it, wait a second……”

The badge that a guard carried with them was a card key that both acted as authentication and could perform simple communications.

The size was enough to fit snugly into one’s palm and the interior was the crystallization of Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>’s technology.

“Yes, who is it?”

“It’s me.”

“……”

He cut off the communication with a click.

“Sorry, Monica, it looks like they got the wrong person.”

“Is that so? It didn’t seem like it.”

In the time it took Monica to tilt her head with a look of confusion, a second call came.

“Suddenly cutting me off like that is quite defiant.“

“……I’m just going to say this ahead of time, but I don’t have time to accompany you in training right now.”

“I’ve also just returned from an official trip. I have something to talk to you about that, so come to the fourth room on floor 28. It’s a room for Regular Guards, but your member code will be permitted.“

……Look at that, it really is me accompanying you, isn’t it.

Since the moment he heard the voice of the man calling, he had a feeling it would be like that.

“Could it be that the one who’s monitoring my member code is”

“The absolute authority of a Sennenshi is pretty handy.“

“……This is an abuse of authority.”

He hung up while wanting to look at the heavens.

“Sorry, something urgent came up. I’ll be right back.”

“Where are you going?”

“Well, just a little over there.”

He pointed up with his index finger in response to Monica who asked again.

Part 3

"……It's nostalgic."

Continuing down the path that could fit five full-grown adults standing side-to-side, he looked around at the spread-out rooms.

The tower's 28th floor was prepared for the guards' training. The Cadet Guards were assigned the outdoor training grounds so there wasn't much of a chance to visit here but he remembered from his time as an Elite Guard three years ago.

"The fourth room, so it's this one……"

He placed his badge to the card reader as Leon had said.

—Authenticated—

"Oh."

Immediately after the door opened, his eyes were seared by the strong brilliance that imitated the sun.

The room was modeled after a canyon — with the floor as a gigantic boulder and the four walls made of rock that rose perpendicular to the ground, it had been faithfully reproduced.

At the center of that room was a young man in a white longcoat who was standing still.

Upon the white that would make a woman take a second look without thinking was long silver hair which evoked the image of a lion. His burly and well-trained body would remind one of a steel blade.

"I'm here."

"Jeez, while I was out on official business, what were you doing?"

Leon Nestorius Ova. The man recognized as the greatest great sword wielder on the floating continent. He had been his friend for ten years and his sole rival in peerless swordsmanship.

"What do you mean, I was applying for a mission."

"Not that. What I wanted to talk about was the mission that I just mentioned."

……The one you just mentioned?

Let's see, was there a mission that Leon had told me about.

"It's the Governmental Sector case. We went on a confidential mission, remember."

"Ahh, if it's that one, there's no way I could forget."

It had happened three weeks ago. He had been invited by Leon who had received a direct order from Queen Salah to the floating archipelago <Lagoon>. There, they had discovered a peculiar facility hidden within an island.

Then they had found a hidden Yuugenshu cultivation water tank. It was within the floating archipelago <Lagoon> which was Governmental Sector territory, so the possibility of it being related to the Governmental Sector was high. Based on that judgment by the executives of Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>, a meeting had been arranged between Tenketsu Palace <Sophia> and the Governmental Sector.

“The meeting is pretty soon, right?”

“It’s in exactly two weeks. And you’ll also be slipping into that meeting.”

……Slipping into?

That almost sounded like he was going to secretly attend the meeting.

“Secretly, you mean? We’re the ones who found the Yuugenshu water tank. I thought we might be called to the meeting as witnesses.”

“It’s the executive office’s job to report that. Discussions aren’t our specialty, after all. It’ll be a complex exchange about that facility behind the scenes, so it’s best to leave that to the experts.

“Ah, well……that’s kind of self-explanatory.”

The Yuungenshu that was sleeping underground was the problem. They had only discovered one, but if there were more by any chance, it would be much too dangerous. The executive office should be able to explain that well.

“The executive office doesn’t specialize in Yuugenshu, so the Yuugenshu’s water tank is”

“Being investigated by those suited to it.”

Leon nodded slightly with his arms crossed.

“The Priestesses are doing it.”

“The Priestesses? The Priestesses are travelling outside the tower?”

He doubted his ears upon hearing the words Leon spoke. That the Priestesses, of which only five existed, would leave the floating continent was unheard of even if they were attending a meeting.

“It just means this is that serious of a matter.”

Perhaps he had thought the same thing as Leon nodded once again with a sigh.

“No matter what the goal, cultivating a Yuugenshu is outrageous. No, to begin with, there is a necessity to obtain confirmation about whether that’s truly possible. If the Priestesses personally set out, then even the Governmental Sector will show some movement. And that role will likely fall to Ymy.”

“Ymy?”

Ymy Ele Soufflenictole — Sheltis’ childhood friend. She had become the fifth Priestess at the age of seventeen and also become able to choose a Sennenshi.

“But Ymy doesn’t have a Sennenshi, so going outside is……”

“None of the other Priestesses are free. The one most suited to discussions is Meimel, but it’ll be right after she finishes maintaining Hyouketsu Kyoukai in place of the Queen. She’ll be fatigued.”

Of the five Priestesses, the first and third are currently patrolling outside the tower.

The three remaining are the second Priestess, Meimel, the fifth Priestess, Ymy and the fourth Priestess, Syun-rei. If Meimel can’t, then Ymy and Syun-rei are the next candidates but—

“……I see, it’s difficult for Syun-rei.”

Thinking upon the black-haired Priestess, he agreed with Leon.

Syun-rei became a Priestess the youngest and was an outstanding Shinryoku practitioner but she was also burdened with extreme anthropophobia. If it was Syun-rei who couldn’t even walk around the tower without Leon, there was no way she could go to the distant floating archipelago <Lagoon> on business.

“So by process of elimination, it falls to Ymy?”

“That’s how it is. It seems the third Priestess was going to come back instead of having Ymy travel far but……that’s a waste. I’m going to change back to the original topic, about the mission.”

A Priestess and the upper echelons of Tenketsu Palace <Sophia> would be setting off for the Governmental Sector. There was only one thing he could think of as a mission for a guard following along.

“An escort?”

“That’s right. Those attending from the Governmental Sector haven’t been announced, but the Chiefs of the General Affairs Bureau and the Office of Management Affairs will be attending from Tenketsu Palace <Sophia> with two secretaries. Together with the Priestess, that makes five people.

As an escort, five people was a small group, but with a Priestess included, the responsibility was heavy. At any rate, they were the protectors of the floating continent, so there could not even be the chance of an accident.

“Wait, are Cadet Guards like us even allowed to escort Ymy?”

Escorting the Priestesses was entrusted to Sennenshi. Not to mentioned Elite Guards or Regular Guards, but having Cadet Guards as the escort had never been done.

“As you expected, that much is impossible. Considering the tower’s rules and precedents, in all probability, the escorting will be temporarily left with the Cadre Guard.”

The Cadre Guard — out of the Elite Guards who possess superior true ability and repeat the severe ranking competition, this was the person whose skills stand at the summit of that.

……If Ymy were to choose her Sennenshi without waiting for me.

……The guard who would definitely become a Sennenshi, huh.

“Be careful. They’re someone who’ll figure out your true identity if you act carelessly.”

“Eh?”

Sheltis opened his eyes wide at Leon’s abrupt words.

“You also know the person who’s the Cadre Guard right now. You’ll understand if I say it’s ‘Jelshuvessa’ whom you’ve competed with countless times.” [T/N: Accepting suggestions for her name (ジェルシュヴェッサー / jerushuvessa-)! Just leave them in the comments.]

“Jelshuvessa……no way, it can’t be.”

“It’s her.“

“Uaa……wa-wait a second! That’s no joke!”

He yelled out while holding his head.

“I’m bad at dealing with that person. I really can’t tell what they’re thinking.”

The opponent he had competed with countless times as fellow Elite Guards three years ago.

‘She’ stood out from even amongst the Elite Guards. It was such that it was strange that she hadn’t become a Sennenshi up until three years later.

“Even I’m bad at dealing with her. Anyway, I’ve warned you.”

“Yeah……well, it can’t be helped. If it’s her, then there’s no mistaking her skill.”

“Aren’t you honest?”

“It’s because it’s much better than having some random Elite Guard I don’t know escorting Ymy. ……I know I can’t be the one escorting her.”

He had no right to escort a Priestess, being a Cadet Guard. There was still a need for somebody to defend Ymy.

“……To be honest, it’s a little frustrating but there’s no point in bluffing.”

“That’s some admirable attitude. At any rate, that Cadre Guard should temporarily become Ymy’s escort. It’ll be fine if you go along to the Governmental Sector as the escort of the other VIPs.”

“I see, understood.”

He calmly stopped breathing and looked towards the ceiling.

……I wonder why, my heart is pounding.

……Even though my goal of becoming a Sennenshi hasn’t been fulfilled yet. It’s been a while since I’ve felt this tension.

If he was chosen for this mission, he could travel together with Ymy.

It wouldn’t be him protecting her but it felt like the first great step in that direction.

“The first thing is to win that mission. Chances for a Cadet Guard to travel together with a Priestess are rare so the corresponding merit points for the mission are also high. You should keep in mind that other units will also be aiming for it.”

“I’ll do my best. Since the first thing is to win the mission.”

“You do that. Well then, I should be going, I’m keeping Syun-rei waiting.”

“Ah, Leon. Hold up.”

Flapping his coat, he turned towards his back.

“What is it?”

“……Tell Ymy something. We’ll definitely be going together.”

“If I don’t forget.”

Replying with a blunt manner of speech, the silver-haired young man left towards the elevator.

Part 4

“Well? Was it there?”

“I’m in the middle of searching. ……Ah, this is it, isn’t it.”

Kagura’s fingers which were typing at high speeds on the computer’s keys halted.

‘ Mission number 16. ‘Governmental Sector Dispatch’

Subject ‘VIP Escort’, Destination ‘Governmental Sector’, Duration ’4 days’, Recruits ‘First Unit’ ‘

—This is undoubtedly what Leon was talking about.

Confirming the information upon the screen countless times, Sheltis slightly tightened his fists.

“The date of posting is yesterday……it’s a freshly updated request.”

Beside him, Monica had her arms crossed with a meek face.

With it being a rare deployment to the Governmental Sector and furthermore, including travelling together with a Priestess, the other units must also be extremely interested. Thinking that and investigating it, there were already seventeen units registered as their rivals.

“The recruiting period is until noon tomorrow. They might multiply the closer it gets to the deadline.”

“……It’ll be difficult, Sheltis.”

Monica, who was staring at the screen, knit her brows.

“I know. In exchange, the merit points are also high.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

“H-huh? That was wrong?”

He blinked and looked at the screen and Kagura pointed at the bottom left of the screen.

“Please look at this warning carefully, Sheltis.”

“……Four people?”

“Yes. This mission’s recruited units have ‘four people’. We don’t have enough with just us.”

The unit leader, Monica, and the members, himself and Kagura. They were one person short.

“They even have limits on the number of people……”

“No. They exist as provisions, but in reality, they’re rare. The difficulty and importance influence it, but an exact limit like four is uncommon.”

……Was it the Governmental Sector?

It was possible that a limit had been placed on the number of messengers from Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>.

“So we need another person if we’re going to participate, huh. After that is”

“Yes, ye—s, Shel-nii! Yuto’s here! Yuto will go too!”

“Then Yuto will; what’s this, it’s perfect. ……Or, wait!?”

There was a sensation of someone clinging to his leg. He timidly peeked down.

“Yuto!?”

The young girl was tightly clinging to his right leg.

Her black eyes were shining with avid curiosity. Her apparent age was five or six. Her shiny black hair was tied into two locks behind her and her azure muffler flowed gently around her neck.

“Shel-nii, I wanted to see you—!”

“U-um……Yuto? I’m happy about being able to see each other too but how did you get in here?”

This was the meeting room, so the door was auto-locking. Those not related to Tenketsu Palace <Sophia> shouldn’t be able to open the door.

……Ah, no, wait. I have a hint of whose specialty this falls under.

“Tada—, I’ve kept you waiting. The incompetent Ilis makes her return to the front lines!“

“……It’s Ilis, as I expected.”

“How cold! You’re terrible, Sheltis, how can you have that reaction to the return of the one who was your partner just a few days ago!?“

Machine crystal <Ilis> flickered bright red.

“……Two people and one thing have joined three people. Suddenly the room has become more packed.”

Kagura was looking not at Yuto and not at the machine crystal <Ilis>, but instead her gaze was directed at girl in overalls who had machine crystal <Ilis> dangling from her neck as a necklace.

“Hey there. Sorry for just barging in suddenly.”

She had unkempt frizzy hair and oil-stained overalls, and her appearance was lacking in make-up or sex appeal, but that suited this simplistic girl best.

Eyriey Leccento — similar to Yuto who was at his feet, she was an acquaintance of his from the living district. They had also been fellow workers at the outdoor cafe ‘The Two Swans <Albireo>’ which was located in the second living district.

“What is it. We’re in the middle of a serious meeting here.”

“Now, now. Here, Sheltis, Ilis’ maintenance is done, you know?”

“Wa-wait, Eyriey! When handing me over, you should be more gent—“

“Whoa.”

He received the machine crystal Ilis, who was voicing some complaint, with both his hands.

“Hey, gotten better?”

“Of course. If there was something off about me, it would also be a big problem for you, right? “

—I’m glad, it’s the same Ilis as always.

Her strong self-assertion in various areas despite being a machine hadn’t changed at all. ……No, it might have been better if that self-assertion had been fixed.

“Yeah, it’s the same Ilis as always. Thank you, Eyriey.”

“Yes, yes, I also enjoyed the luxurious lifestyle in Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>’s VIP room. Well then, we’ll excuse ourselves here. Come on, Yuto.”

“Eh—……Yuto wants to go with Shel-nii.”

The young girl clung to his leg while saying “Dun wanna, dun wanna”. ……What a predicament. It would feel pitiful if they were to forcefully separate here.

“Umm, shall I look after her for just a little?”

“Ah—, it’s fine if you don’t ignore it. We’re looking for somebody.”

“Is there a lost child? In that case, why don’t you try announcing a lost child on the first floor of the tower?”

“That’s not it. That’s right, I’ll also introduce her to you this time, Sheltis. It’s a girl I came to know while working on Ilis’ maintenance. She’s a really cute girl named Sasa!”

Eyriey winked after lifting Yuto into her arms.

“Sasa?……That’s a strange name.”

The way the name resounded was strange and it was spelled in a way that wasn’t often seen on the floating continent. He had never heard of it in Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>, not to mention at the living district.

“Is she from the living district?”

“Nope. She seems to be a live-in worker in the tower. Being a General Affairs staff member at only fourteen and even being able to use Shinryoku.”

“She can use Shinryoku?”

The one who knit their brows at that was Monica. It was unmistakably a word that stirred up the interest of Monica who had been an apprentice Priestess.

“That’s right. So after completing Ilis’ maintenance, I thought we could go have fun with her. But when I did a search in the name register for Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>, nothing popped up.”

“……Was the name wrong?”

“Mm~, truthfully, it didn’t feel like that. That’s why I decided to go around searching on foot. Well then, let’s get going, Yuto.”

“Oka—y. See you, Shel-nii.”

The two boisterous girls dashed down the path.

“Those two are full of energy.”

“It was the same during my maintenance. Those two are like a lump of energy. Good grief, that supervisor <Master>……was really shrewd in getting friendly with Eyriey.“

“Hmm?”

Supervisor <Master>. He felt like he had heard a fairly strange and uncommon word just now.

“Ah, it’s nothing, just me talking to myself.”

“……Well, that’s fine. So what should we do, Monica?”

Eyriey’s group having set off on searching the tower and they had a mountain of problems. They didn’t have enough people for the Governmental Sector mission.

“First, I’d like to have a solid plan.”

Monica operated the terminal in place of Kagura. With experienced movements, she brought up the screen to display the list of defense missions.

There were currently fourteen missions recruiting. Eight of those allowed for a team of three members.

“There are other missions three people can go on. We should decide if we’ll narrow down the missions we can go on with our current team or if we’ll supplement a fourth member.”

They could aim to be Regular Guards even with just the current members. They had to decide if they would continue with the current minimum members or search for more comrades.

“Sheltis, you want to take on that mission, right?”

“That’s right. The merit points are high and there’s no loss in getting experience with VIP escorting.”

Going to the Governmental Sector with Ymy — even without those personal circumstances, it was still a mission worth applying for. The opportunities to escort would increase when they became Regular Guards. He would like for them to gain experience ahead of time as a Cadet Guard.

“VIP escorting and patrolling the nature district, it would be best if we were to experience both of those at least once.”

“……I see, what do you think, Kagura?”

“Sooner or later we’re going to need a fourth member so I have no qualms in aiming for this mission.”

Kagura rested her elbows on the table while holding her head up with her hands.

“That’s unexpected. What’s your reason for thinking that?”

“There is a big difference in the tactics for a three-person team and a four-person team. ……For example, let’s say we’re currently split into the ‘Control Tower’, ‘Vanguard’ and ‘Rear Guard’.”

Kagura’s eyeshield slowly turned towards him.

“Here’s a problem for you, Sheltis. How many different ways can we split three people into these three roles for our tactics? The time limit is ten seconds. Ten……nine……one. Okay, stop.”

“Didn’t you count only three seconds just now!?”

“3 x 2 x 1 = 6 patterns. The first person to choose gets three choices. The next person can’t choose the same as the first one, so he or she gets two choices. The last person has the final role, so he or she doesn’t get to choose.” [T/N: I'm sure many of you know this is just factorials. For those who don't know what she's using, look up permutations and combinations.]

Even Ilis’ voice sounded like one of somebody who had just seen something pitiful.

“……Are you possibly making a fool out of me?”

“Well, keep listening. Like was said just now, we can only form 6 patterns with three people. However, with four people, that become 4 x 3 x 2 x 1 = 24 patterns. Just by adding one person, it increases by four times. That’s a big difference.”

The limit of a three person unit with the three roles of ‘Control Tower’, ‘Vanguard’ and ‘Rear Guard’.

However, adding a fourth person would allow, for example, Monica to not be the control tower and instead act using her Shinryoku techniques that she learned as an apprentice Priestess.

“The battle strength of one more person is necessary, huh……that’s right, but the problem is who to invite.”

Monica sighed with her arms folded.

“Unfortunately, I have no clue. How about you, Sheltis?”

“Same here.”

“For the time being.“

Machine crystal <Ilis> said that with a sigh and murmured.

“In times like this, why not consult with that instructor? “

Part 5

Floor 287 of Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>.

There were only four rooms established on this vast floor. They were the rooms of the fourth and fifth Priestesses as well as the Sennenshi that guard those two.

Out of those, at the room assigned to the fifth Priestess.

“Ah— jeez, it’s busy, so busy! Why did it come to this!?”

Holding a large luggage bag with both arms, the girl with faint off-golden hair whined.

Ymy Ele Soufflenictole — she was a lovely girl with jade green eyes and was clad in pure white vestments.

She was valued at an absolute rank in Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>.

She was a guardian deity of the floating continent but in contrast to that holy image,

“I-I’m done with this—!”

Her shout spread throughout the living room.

“What do I do, what do I do……I have to get ready, discuss the plans and my training schedule as a Priestess is also jam packed.”

She stared intensely at her notebook’s calendar while constantly sitting and standing from a chair.

In comparison to Ymy who was flustered like that,

“I understand that you’re busy but you’re wasting too much time just panicking like that, you know?”

Leon said while sitting directly on the carpet.

“B-but, but, suddenly participating in the meeting with the Governmental Sector……I didn’t hear anything about this!?”

“You’ll likely only have to say one thing until you reach the Governmental Sector. The small discussions will be handled by the Chief of the General Affairs Bureau.”

“That one thing is difficult……”

—But yeah, there’s no point in yelling.

She reverted her ballooned cheeks and sat down in a chair.

“But, you know, haven’t there been a lot of events lately? Even though I greeted everyone not too long ago, I only have two weeks until the meeting with the Governmental Sector.”

“There are no other substitutes from the Priestesses, after all.”

“It’s not that, ……The true duty of a Priestess is to pray together with the Queen <Salah>-sama for the barrier. Greeting everyone and participating in a meeting are completely different.”

Those are of a totally different importance and I think it’s not good that a Priestess is intruding into that. Just like this time, going out as a means of negotiating with the Governmental Sector would be unthinkable normally.

“I am……still inexperienced but if the Priestesses didn’t do their best, the barrier around the Garden of Corrupted Song <Eden> would dissolve. As I thought, I really want to do my best to prevent that instead.”

“Was this a hint from Meimel?”

“No, it’s just something I thought about myself……is it strange?”

“No.”

Leon said that with a face that was serious about something.

“I just thought it was a very Priestess-like way of thinking. In a good sense, it means that I’ve heard that you understand the necessity and importance of Priestesses.”

“I-is that so?”

……He is praising me, right?

It couldn’t be helped that having Leon who rarely complimented others say that would leave one feeling ticklish.

“Did something happen?”

“Eh……”

“Did something happen to make you change your thinking about Priestesses?”

“I-it’s not anything as major as that……probably.”

I just — want to purify the Mateki residing within Sheltis.

For he who is doing his best and aiming to become a Sennenshi, I would just like to be able to respond to him.

“Just like you, Leon……I just thought that I had to study more.”

While being recognized as the strongest great sword user on the floating continent, even now he continued to train and moderate himself more harshly than anyone else. That was something no one should emulate.

“If so, all the more reason that you shouldn’t be flustered over something of this degree.”

“Th-that’s because……well……umm.”

After being hard-pressed for a reply, while twirling the napkin upon the table.

“What is it?”

“No……we-well……”

……It’s hard to tell Leon, isn’t it.

……That I’d like to spend time choosing my clothes and other things if Sheltis is coming along.

“What, so it’s about Sheltis?”

“—Y-you’re wro!? I-I-I, I-I didn’t ha-have that kind of intention?”

“You’re not speaking clearly.”

Oh boy, I thought she’d become a little more Priestess-like……sighing while looking like he wanted to say that, Leon stared at her with a deeply meaningful look.

“I don’t mind if you think about him but I’m begging you, don’t show that flirtatious attitude when you have to act like a Priestess. It’ll set a bad example for your subordinates.”

“Uu……kuu? But! You don’t have the right to say that!”

“Ohh?”

Leon’s eyes flashed aggressively.

“Saying that I’m flirtatious is interesting. I’d like you to tell me just how I’m flirtatious.”

“There’s no need to tell you.”

Gently shaking aside the hair in front of her eyes, she pointed in his direction.

"……What's that on your lap?"

"Hrm?"

The lap of Leon who was sitting cross-legged directly on the carpet.

A girl wearing kimono-style vestments was there sleeping soundly.

"It's Syun-rei."

"It's Syun-rei, right?"

It was the early afternoon. The girl who was sleeping happily with shallow breaths and the one supporting her, the silver-haired young man.

The degree of warmth in that motif was enough to make one sigh just from looking and inspire a painter to paint a picture just from passing by.

"Wait, Ymy."

He called for her to wait with an ever-serious face.

"Whaaat is it?"

"Don't misunderstand. I didn't do anything. Syun-rei did this on her own."

"……Welcome back, Leon."

"……I'm sleepy."

Syun-rei approached Leon who was sitting on the carpet. Facing that lap, she suddenly lay down and while he was thinking about what to do, she fell asleep.

"But she won't wake up even though we've talked this much. Was she that sleepy?"

The young man tilted his head with a look of admiration.

"She was lonely while you were traveling, Leon. Isn't it that she's relieved?"

She rested her chin on her hands above the table and gazed at the two.

……Ah, but.

……Syun-rei looks like she's really enjoying her sleep.

Syun-rei rolled over as she watched. Soft murmuring, "U……n," she was really sleeping upon Leon's lap with a relieved expression.

……Somebody……it seems really nice.

……Being that relieved and supported……it's against the rules.

I don’t know what to say but, like this, they really suit each other.

Syun-rei had a small build to start with and Leon was blessed with a good physique even amongst men.

Because it was those two, they became like a painting and the happiness from them reached others; it was already at an unfair level, that truly wonderful scene.

In comparison with that, her and Sheltis were—

Mateki and Shinryoku, it was the law of the world that they would reject each other.

He and I……can’t touch even a single fingertip.

That’s why it was well-known to her that the relationship of the two before her eyes was her ideal.

Wishing and wishing and it was still further on, a relationship that was much too far from her.

“Th-that’s against the rules! There’s too much power in that!”

“What are you talking about?”

“Ju-just talking to myself!”

Yeah, there’s no way……I’m jealous. I’ll absolutely one day also have a relationship like that. I’ve decided to dream of that and do my best, after all.

“……”

“What’s wrong, Leon? You suddenly went quiet.”

“The meeting will be soon.”

Leon alternated from looking at the clock on the wall of the room to the Priestess on his lap.

“……When will Syun-rei wake up?”

“I think it’ll probably be a while longer.”

“……”

“……”

A second silence.

“Ymy.”

“What?”

“……Help me. I can’t move.”

“Isn’t it fine, just indulge a Priestess’ selfishness for a day.”

Smiling — Ymy watched over the two before her eyes.

Chapter 2 – Three People Plus One

Part 1

Tenketsu Palace, Outdoor Training Grounds.

The roaring sound of water and fog-like mist. She was there in the field where an imitation waterfall was flowing magnificently from a steep cliff.

She wore a navy blue suit devoid of any wrinkles along with a bright red necktie. Carrying a pitch black whip, she sputtered smoke from the cigarette in her mouth.

It was Instructor Yumelda who was known as a demonic coach amongst the Cadets.

“Ah, there you are. Instructor, the truth is I have something I’d really like to consult you about.”

Sheltis called out to that back profile.

“No.”

“I haven’t even said anything yet!?”

“I’m joking. So what did you need?”

While spinning a spare cigarette with her fingertips, she gradually turned towards him.

“Well, it’s about the four person limit for mission number 16 from the merit system”

“No.”

“That’s! Why! I said! I haven’t finished saying everything!?”

“It’s something I’ll understand even if I don’t hear it all. You want to go on that mission that has a four person limit but you don’t have any comrades outside of your group of three. You’d like to see if it’s possible to apply with just three people or otherwise be introduced to someone who seems like they would enter your unit as the fourth member —— that’s about it, right?”

The instructor stared sidelong at the Cadet Guards participating in mock battles opposite the waterfall. She wrote down an evaluation on the score sheet in her hand and showed a grin.

“Well?”

“Perfect. It’s accurate to the point that it can’t even be grumbled about.“

The machine crystal <Ilis> flickered. That the machine crystal <Ilis> who rarely complimented anyone would give praise of this degree showed that the instructor’s observation was just that spot-on.

“It’s very interesting. How did you figure it out to such a degree?“

“There were other units that came to me with the exact same question. You guys are just starting late; the other units already started moving to secure a fourth member yesterday, you know?”

In others words, all the people with prowess were already snatched up.

“By the way, up to today a total of twenty teams have registered for mission number 16. The screening has already started so if you want to get in, you better hurry.”

“……Is what she says. What do we do, Sheltis?”

He stared into space while feeling the gazes of both Monica and the instructor.

——Even if the competition amongst units is harsh, I’d still like to aim for that mission.

It wasn’t just because he wanted to go together with Ymy. There was that Yuugenshu cultivation water tank at that facility as well. Then there was the girl who was known as the Forbidden Crystal.

……I have to go, that’s what my gut is telling me.

“It’s just my selfish wish, but I’d really like to find a fourth member and take that mission.”

“I see. Then it can’t be helped, I have a single candidate in mind.”

And with that, Kagura lifted her head that was staring at the machine pearl <Machina>’s screen.

“Ehh……Kagura has someone in mind?”

“Yes. It will be hard to win him over but I think [he] will be good.”

He, meaning a male Cadet Guard. But who? To think that she, whom everyone knew tended to be weary of strangers, would go as far as to recommend them herself.

“Fumu, I’m interested. Who is it?”

“Him. The problem child that the instructor also knows very well——”

The instant Kagura replied, the instructor was was about to put a cigarette in her mouth froze up.

“……Hey, you wouldn’t be about a name that starts with ‘V’.”

“It is that very one. We will invite him.”

“No, well, hold up, Kagura. Don’t be so rushed.”

With an uncharacteristically meek expression, instructor Yumelda held onto the shoulder of the girl wearing a mechanical helmet.

“He won’t become a fighting force. That eccentric guy……it’ll be negotiable if it’s just registering a member, but you can’t expect anything from him as a comrade.”

“Well, we’ll see. Come on, we’re going, Monica, Sheltis.”

Kagura shook off the instructor and quickly continued on.

“……Problem child?”

“……Eccentric guy?”

Both of them left behind, Sheltis and Monica exchanged looks.

Part 2

“His characteristics?”

Kagura said while looking at the guidance screen on the machine pearl <Machina>. She was heading away from the training grounds and Monica called out to her with a stiff expression.

“Yeah, the instructor’s reaction was kind of……not good.”

“It is as the instructor said. He’s a ruffian and a sloth, as well as an outcast from the rest of the Cadet Guards. In the five years since he enlisted, he has done at best one or two missions.”

“……He sounds like quite a horrid guy. I wonder if there’s a reason for it. For example, a serious illness or the like.”

“No, he is the type that only has his body’s sturdiness to brag about.”

The girl with the mechanical helmet replied smoothly. She stealthily exchanged glances with Monica who was about to speak and then it was Sheltis’ turn to inquire.

“A strong body means……he has good endurance?”

“That’s probably not true. He has the basic body strength but he’s the type that thinks training is a pain so his strength probably ranks in the middle of the lower half or the bottom of the upper half. He also has no exceptional techniques.”

Those were the backbone of a Cadet Guard. He found that harsh training to be a pain and was a ruffian and a lazy person.

……Is such a person really okay?

“By the way, Kagura, why did you think that person was good?”

“Because he’s a good-natured person.“

A good-natured person? I wonder what she means. He looked at Monica from the side and she shrugged her shoulders saying, “Don’t ask me.”

Several minutes after they started walking.

In front of a bench that was far away from the training grounds, Kagura suddenly stopped.

“Okay, we’re here.”

“……Nobody’s here though.”

Looking around in front of the bench, there was not a single person there. Just to make sure, he also looked around at the surroundings, but there was not a hint of a Cadet Guard like [him] whom Kagura had described.

“Sheltis, not there, over here. Here, look up.”

“Up?”

What Kagura pointed to was not the bench but the large tree beside it that was almost a hundred years old.

The moss-covered trunk was about the diameter of even an adult’s embrace. That split into a complex set of branches and even further along those, the leaves were in full bloom.

“He should be here skipping training around now. So take this.” [T/N: It has 昼寝っている as the main and さぼっている above. The former is an "afternoon nap" or a "siesta" and the latter is "skipping (classes, lessons, training, etc.)".]

Here, she said as she handed him an iron mallet.

“The interior is filled with gunpowder, so if you strike the base of the tree, it will release an immense explosion noise. It was originally for catching bugs atop the trees. By the way, it’s pending a patent.”

“……So it’s your invention. So I hit the trunk?”

He brandished the heavy mallet with both hands. He added his waist’s movement to his muscular strength and, just like that, slammed the mallet into the center of the trunk as hard as he could.

Zun —— came a roaring sound.

The explosion noise rattled the large tree and the immense explosion noise echoed in the surroundings.

“～～～～Iittt huuurts……my ears……my ears are breaking!?”

He thought his ears were getting done in by the excessive explosion noise.

“Sheltis……you’re that kind of person. Couldn’t you tell beforehand that it would be like this?“

“Shut up.”

He looked back at Kagura while covering his ears that were still hurting.

“Kagura, I wasn’t told that the noise would be this extreme!”

“I have my ears hidden by this mechanical helmet, after all. Look, Monica also took refuge far away.”

“Isn’t that unfair!?”

“Come now, don’t say that. Look, our goal fell out properly.”

After Kagura pointed overhead——

Zaa……zuzazazazza……zazaaa……together with severed branches and countless leaves, something fell from the upper part of the large tree.

The one that fell backwards onto the ground was a young man.

“I…, i……it huuuuuuuuurts!?”

Letting out a yell, that Cadet Guard sprang up.

He had short-trimmed blond hair and light brown eyes. He was taller than Sheltis by about a fist’s length and he was muscular with a large build as Kagura had said. He looked to be in his early twenties. His looks were orderly but wasted because of how bad his face was; he was that kind of man.

“Ah, s-sorry. Are you okay —— u-uwaa!?”

“Ahh!? Yoouu, you’re the bastard who’s disturbing other people’s sleep!?”

Calling out to him, the young man grabbed his collar.

“You’re pretty brave, aren’t you; if you’re looking for a fight then——”

“Yes, yes, stop there. Well, wait just a bit, Vaiel.” [T/N: His name is ヴァイエル. That's "vaieru". If you have a better suggestion for how to write his name, please comment it.]

Kagura held the fist of the man called Vaiel tightly.

“Huh? Who are you? Why are you suddenly butting in?”

“I apologize for disturbing your nap. We have come today with a request for you.”

“Haa, who the heck would listen to what a brat like you has to say.”

“Come now, don’t say that. The thing is”

“Do you want your front teeth broken? I already said I won’t listen!”

“It will take fifteen minutes.”

“Get lost. Get lost right now.”

“Then ten minutes.”

“……Farewell.”

“No.”

The hand of Vaiel who was about to leave was once again grabbed by Kagura.

“You……can’t you hearing me telling you to get lost?”

“The thing is we’re looking for a fourth member for our unit.”

“I see, it seems you wanna be sent flying. Grit your teeth.”

“And we have selected you. We have already told Instructor Yumelda.”

“Hey, somebody take her to a hospital; this isn’t even worth con——”

“First comes the explanation of the unit.”

“……Damn brat.”

Vaiel’s eyebrows stiffened and he fell silent.

In contrast to he who seemed to be ready to throw a punch any second, Kagura was looking up at that with an unchanging nonchalant tone.

“Uwaa— amazing, she’s silenced her opponent. Look, Sheltis, that’s how it’s done. That kind of self-centered negotiation. Please learn from it.“

For some reason, the machine crystal <Ilis> was being lively and seemed to be enjoying herself.

“Learn that?……I don’t wanna.”

Sheltis shook his head with a speechless look.

“Five minutes. I won’t listen for even a second more.”

Vaiel sat on the bench with a thump.

“Then I shall be brief. If I had to sum it up, we’re looking for someone to join our unit and we have come to invite you.”

“You guys’ unit?”

He leered over here and smiled.

“Hah! Two girls with no sex appeal and some mediocre looking brat. This unit looks like you’re playing house.”

“……Hey, Kagura, what’s with this guy. This kind of rude guy——”

As expected, Monica couldn’t keep silent and she stepped up front.

“Yes. We’d very much like you to take up the papa role in this play house.”

“……”

Having it returned so deftly, Vaiel fell silent once again.

“……I don’t feel like it. To begin with, three people is good enough for a unit. You can go on missions and also become Regular Guards. You don’t need me.”

“There is a four-person mission we want to go on.”

“Hah, aren’t you honest! In short, it’s that, you want to just make up for your lack of numbers!?”

Vaiel scoffed. In the face of those provocative argument, without so much as a change in face color, Kagura slowly shook her head. [T/N: 顔色も変えず is literally "face color also not changing". It just means she had no reaction. What an iron maiden.]

“I told you. That we would like to add you as a proper member.”

“……”

“If you look at us, we’re a mish-mash of members, but I recommend us.”

“Are you stupid? Who would trust a mish-mash of three brats?”

“You wouldn’t.”

“Right? So——”

Kagura shot out her hand in front of him as he tried to put an end to the conversation.

“So let’s do it like this. First, we’ll go on a mission together. Then we’ll see how it goes.”

“There’s no chance.”

“You don’t want to?”

“I don’t. I’ll pass on annoying stuff like that.”

It was curt. Resolutely cutting it off, he confirmed the time on his watch.

“It’s been five minutes. I’m gonna go sleep, so listen. Don’t appear before me ag——”

“Wait.”

Kagura called out to the back of the man who didn’t even turn around.

“I see. Then we’ll go with the last method: persuasion by force.”

“Hah, you will?”

That calm manner of speaking seemed to grate on his nerves. Vaiel looked over with an expression that was half-angry and half-sneering.

“Yes. Until you cry and beg for forgiveness——”

“Ha ha ha, a hit from a brat like you won’t hurt or even itch.”

“I take it you are fine with me leaking your secret throughout Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>?“

For an instant, nobody understood the meaning of those words and a eerie calm settled.

"……Oi, what do you mean by that?"

"It's simple. I have over one hundred observation cameras that I personally installed within the tower so I know secrets that people never want others to know."

She pointed with her finger.

In that instant, the floating machine pearl <Machina> divided into a puzzle piece shape and spread out in the air. On that small piece, something was installed —— a small camera with a high-powered lens.

"……You couldn't have."

He seemed to have understood what she meant as he bit hard on his molars.

"Have you understood that this is not a threat? Well then, what were you doing in a place nobody knows about, I wonder. For example, yesterday at the storehouse next to the outdoor training grounds———"

In that instant, Vaiel's face suddenly went pale.

"Wai-wait a second! That's dirty, how is this not a threat!"

"It's not a threat, it's a negotiation. Once is fine, so come with us on a mission just once. If you do, I promise I won't leak your secret to anyone. Of course, the decision of whether to properly join after the mission will be your own."

"……Interesting. Let's do this, peeping young lady."

The young man's fist was trembling and a dangerous smile floated up on his face.

"Negotiations have succeeded then."

"……That compromise will only happen once. Got it?"

"Yes."

She nodded seriously and then turned to come over here.

"Well then, Vaiel, I'll introduce you to our unit. This is Monica, the unit leader. The unattractive one beside her is Sheltis."

"The unattractive bit was unnecessary!"

His complaint was easily ignored.

"Well then, Vaiel, you also introduce yourself. With your full name."

"Ha? Who would go to the trouble of naming himself to people he's only going to go on one mission with. This Vaiel Bahhabel has no name to give you!" [T/N: His last name is バッハベル or "bahhaberu". Another name that is hard to

translate. Specifically because that ッ there means it has a pause, so you have to work that into the name. Any suggestions, folks?]

He raised his voice and folded his arms.

……Umm.

Not thinking on how to react, Sheltis timidly put his thoughts to words.

“You just named yourself. You said Vaiel Bahhabel.”

“I also heard that.”

“It’s also perfectly recorded in my logs.“

“Ah……”

Having finally realized it after having it pointed out to him, he kept his arms folded and opened his mouth.

“Y-you guys, that was nothing just now, nothing! Forget it, forget it immediately!”

He went bright red and flapped his arms.

“See? He’s unexpectedly amiable.”

Pointing at him like that, only Kagura chuckled with a smile.

Part 3

Floor 48 of Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>, Mechanical Bureau Reception Lobby.

“Shasa……Shasa, huh. I did a name search, but it’s not showing up……it doesn’t seem like she’s our bureau’s member.”

It was a past middle-aged man who was looking at an electronic terminal’s screen. [T/N: It's 初老 which indicates somebody above 40.]

“I see, thanks, occhan. I’ll go search again.”

……Hm—, didn’t find her like I thought.

Scratching at her unkempt orange hair, Eyriey sighed for the umpteenth time today.

“Maybe it’s the General Affairs Bureau or Tower Control Bureau? The ones with the highest member count are those two so the change is high.”

“Ohh, that’s good information! Well then, I’ll go check it out!”

“Is she an acquaintance?”

“Yeah, that’s it, it’s a girl I just became friends with not too long ago in the tower. I was a little interested.”

[The next time we can meet will be in one month.]

It seemed like as an office girl, she would be swamped with work for a month.

“I thought that it was quite a difficult job so I was going to give her some candy.”

“Ohh. Then you really must search for her.”

“Yeah. Later then, occhan, sorry for bothering you in the middle of work.”

Waving at the staff member that was boxed in at the counter, she once again dashed down the path.

……As I thought, not here either.

There had been no matches in Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>’s name registry. After that, she had been checking every Bureau’s individual name registries at random but the name ‘Shasa’ had not had a match.

[My name is Shasa Endens Lin Kale.] [T/N: This one's pretty straight forward. Shasa Endensu Rin Ke-ru.]

[It's difficult to remember, isn't it. Everybody knows me as Salah, so you can also use that."

She was sure she had named herself as that.

"Mm— this is looking more and more like I misheard it. Hey, Yuto?.....Yuto?"

The young girl she should have been with wasn't there. Eyriey noticed that after rounding the path's corner and nearing the elevator.

".....Nooot good."

With haste, that was the moment Eyriey's objective went from searching for someone to searching for a lost child.

Part 4

The sound of passing through that rent the wind.

That which was dancing about in the sky roared and nosedived, approaching in one go.

"One unit approaching, jump to the left!"

Responding to the girl's voice behind him, he jumped. Dodging the black scrap of metal that passed by right beside him, Sheltis slashed into open space with his right sword.

——Clang!

The deflected scrap of metal flew in the exact opposite direction and collided with another scrap of metal. Becoming entangled, the two scraps unified and fell to the ground.

"Monica, go right, and Sheltis, go around the right just like that!"

Kagura was the one giving out successive instructions.

While checking both the screen of the eyeshade and the machine pearl <Machina> at the same time, she calculated the path which would guarantee optimal dodging space.

"Ohh, this is pleasant. Maybe I could have an afternoon nap?"

"Don't say such easygoing things!"

Silencing the machine crystal <Ilis>' carefree talking, he defended against the black scraps coming one after another with his left sword. Taking the strikes and killing off the impact with the back of the sword, he struck them down with his other sword the moment they stopped.

He did that how many times of times——

"Stop right there."

The instructor's order reverberated across the testing grounds.

"Fumu, it was passable."

Instructor Yumelda wrote a number down on her score sheet.

"Shooting down count —— Sheltis, 74, Monica, 21, Kagura, 1.....that totals to 96 for the unit; it's passable that it didn't reach triple digits. There were two instances of being shot as well."

"It looks like we'll pass the screening."

Monica said as she put a bottle of drinking water to her lips.

"The criteria for the first screening are shooting down over 90 and only being shot up to 7 times. It's a number for screening so it would be troubling if this didn't pass."

.....For the time being, the first screening has been cleared, huh.

He disassembled the blades machine crystal <Ilis> had constructed and put the swords that had become only hilts into their holders.

"However, that was another extreme assignment of roles."

The instructor who was blowing tobacco smoke narrowed one eye.

"Kagura is specialized to control, Monica is interception and Sheltis is the suicide attacker. It's incomparably extreme. An organization whose capacity would be paralyzed immediately if a single person fell isn't something I should be praising."

"Please say that it's the right person in the right place."

"You sure can say it well. By the way, where's the problem child <Vaiel>? I heard you'd roped him in."

"Ahh, if you're talking about him."

Kagura pointed to the bench that lay beyond the sandy soil. Taking up a position at the center of that was a blond young man who seemed to be in a bad mood and oozed an air of not wanting to do anything.

"I don't see anything but his usual self. He's not going to participate in the mission's screening?"

"Our promise with him is that we'll travel together for the mission so the screening before the mission is outside of our negotiations."

"......Well, I don't mind if you guys says you're fine with it."

An appalled sigh or sympathy or otherwise ——— the smile leaking onto the instructor's face was filled with numerous emotions.

"By the way, you guys have no external injuries? Excess stamina?"

"We're fine."

Sheltis, who reflexively answered like that, regretted it immediately after.

"Okay, then we'll do up to the second screening today."

"Eh?"

"......Sheltis?"

"......People like you."

"......What are you doing."

Part 5

They changed locations to a shaded water supply area——

"......Well, sorry."

Unable to withstand the silent pressure, Sheltis submissively apologized.

——Though the truth is there was a reason.

He thought the question the instructor asked there was also a part of the screening test. If they gave a weak-sounding response there, they'd be targeted for a failing grade. Fearing that, he had answered more quickly than anyone else but it had backfired.

"It has already happened, so it can't be helped."

Monica waved her hand at the base of her neck.

A slight feverishness tinged her snow-white nape. Her skin's pigments were probably faint to begin with. That appearance made one naturally feel that it was sweet and amorous.

"At any rate, let's clear the second screening as well. Two hours later.....I heard that it will be a unit battle."

Monica was regathering her hair into one lock when her expression stiffened.

"It's a four-person battle, so we'll need Vaiel to participate as well."

"Haa?"

The person in question who was sprawled on the bench said crossly,

"Hey, hey, hey, hey, don't joke around. This is different; I said I'd go on the mission, but I didn't hear anything about participating in this farce of a unit battle."

"But——"

"Well now, Vaiel, how about this."

Interrupting Monica, Kagura took a step forward in her place.

"You don't have to do anything other than come out just to fulfill the number requirement. If you're at the very back of the formation, then there will be no reason for the opponent to attack you."

"You mean the rear guard?"

"Yes. Otherwise, I suppose I'll leak that secret to everyone."

"H-hey! You....."

Perhaps it was a really hazardous secret as Vaiel's face immediately went pale.

"How about it?"

".....Damn it, but I'm only being the rear guard. Even if you make a mistake, I'm not moving up front."

"Of course."

Understanding the meaning of his words, Kagura smiled.

"Sheesh. This is the worst, why did I have to meet these kinds of people today."

Vaiel turned around while cursing. Monica chased after him.

"Hey, Vaiel, where are you going?"

"Ahh? I'm just going to get my weapon. Should I go out completely unarmed? I haven't used it lately, so it hasn't even been maintained."

He shrugged without looking back. With his formal clothes draped over his shoulder, he was without a single weapon just as he'd said.

"B-but independent movement is....."

"Do you not trust a single word your comrade says?"

"!"

This time it was Monica's turn to fall silent.

"......Understood. After your weapon's maintenance is complete, please meet us at the southern desert field."

"I'm not a brat. I at least remember the location."

"......We'll be gathering in an hour and a half."

"You're persistent, I said I'll keep my promise."

Leaving behind his words in a tone that sounded neither like a lie nor a truth, the young man lazily walked away. They became unable to see that well-built back.

"......He got me."

Monica smiled bitterly with complex emotions on her face.

"I couldn't retort with anything for a moment there. ......That's right, he's also our comrade right now. Then I must believe that he will come on time."

It was truly risky. If Vaiel didn't have the intention of keeping his promise or his weapon's maintenance wasn't finished in time, they would be short of people for the unit battle and lose by default.

"He will come."

But as if to dispel that insecurity, Kagura lightly nodded.

"......Aren't you quite trusting of him?"

"Yes. Sheltis, you also heard. He said that he would keep his promise."

However, it couldn't be helped that he would become even more interested. The [secret] that had been used in the negotiations with Vaiel was the only thing that hadn’t been told to Sheltis and Monica.

“Say, Kagura, is the secret that you say you ‘will reveal‘ really amazing of a secret?”

“No, it is absolutely nothing major.”

“Eh?”

“It’s nothing major, but it has great importance for him.”

……What does that mean?

But even with him and Monica asking her, Kagura didn’t tell them.

“Rather than that, we’re having a strategy meeting. First is the formation——”

Part 6

A desert —— one of the harshest fields aboveground.

The shining assassin-like direct sunlight coming from overhead was burning his eyelids and the fine sand mixed with metallic materials underfoot was reflecting the sunlight back. There were no shadows or oases in those hot rays.

It was normally forty degrees Centigrade, and depending on the day it had been recorded to reach fifty degrees.

It was a plot of land that faithfully replicated the deserts that lay far from the floating continent. It was the stage designated for the second screening.

“Ahh—……It’s such a pain with this heat, what the Hell was the guy who made it thinking?”

Vaiel had his formal clothes’ sleeves rolled up to his elbows.

On his two hands were iron fist protectors <Knuckle Dusters>. They extended all the way from his fists to his elbows and had numerous designs on the front that showed the formal carved seal of Shinryoku. [T/N: Knuckle dusters is 拳鉄甲. Literally "fist iron armor".]

“That’s quite an uncommon weapon.”

“Ahh? This is?”

Nodding wordlessly, Sheltis also readied his dual swords in both hands.

“Since I haven’t really seen anybody who uses them.”

Iron fist protectors <Knuckle Dusters> were a weapon that specialized in [hitting].

They aimed to raise striking power and also protect the fists from the impact.

Depending on how they were used, they were stronger than edged weapons because of their ease-of-use but——

“You’re not going to say it’s dangerous?”

“……Hmph.”

A Yuugenshu’s entire body was a lump of curses. For that reason, using hand-to-hand combat which required close proximity was extremely dangerous. Even though there were Shinryoku carved seals upon those iron fist protectors

<Knuckle Duster>, it was the same as saying that taking an attack with anything other than those fists would result in being showered with Mateki.

For example, the Sennenshi, Ran —— she was the sole guard who fought Yuugenshu empty-handed, but that was because her skin was directly engraved with the formal carved seals. It was because she had endured the harsh pain and rejection reactions of the carved seals that she was permitted to do that. If it wasn't like that, fighting up-close with a Yuugenshu was a suicidal action.

Yes, unless they were extremely reckless or were unparalleled in skill.

"I haven't used any other weapons before."

"Ah, i-is that so?"

……So it was because he's reckless.

He scratched his cheek in response to the answer he had somewhat expected.

"I'm just gonna say this, but I'm only here to make up for the count. I'll just be loafing off in the rear guard."

"……That's what we promised."

It seemed like he really intended to make up for the count. His behavior didn't beget any will to participate in the unit battle……but if he had no intention of becoming a Regular Guard, why had he entered the tower in the first place?

"Can I ask one thing? Do you have some kind of goal, Vaiel? Like aiming to become a Sennenshi or something."

"None. To begin with, even though I had no interest in becoming a Regular Guard, that Instructor Yumelda half-forced me to enlist. The instructor's a scout or something like that."

"A scout? That's definitely strange."

There was no end to the hopefuls who enlisted as a guard. At any rate, out of those who were skilled in martial arts, an instructor singling one of them out was exceedingly rare.

"It's a real nuisance for me though."

"But——"

Something had caught the instructor's eye. There were also the hopes of the instructor and it should be fine for them to aim to become Regular Guards together.

"It's time. You two, get into your positions."

Suddenly interrupting their conversation, the unit leader <Monica> raised her voice from behind.

"Sheltis, I'm sorry but I'll be relying on you."

"Rather, we're welcoming that. Work him as hard you want."

“Is what she says.”

Flicking machine crystal <Ilis> to silence her, he lined up to the right of Monica.

……That’s right, I have to focus on this first.

The battle with four people unified as a unit.

On the opposing sand hill about twenty metres away. Beside that should be their starting position.

“Well then, we’ll start. First unit, limit of four people.

The format is [Open Flag], time limit is three hours.” [T/N: The "open" here is 公開 which means "open to the public".]

The instructor’s reverberating announcement.

Open Flag —— one of the main methods for unit battles. One person from the team would be the general and defeating that person would constitute victory. Who was the captain would be openly known to both sides and that person would come under concentrated attacks.

“Kagura, I leave it to you.”

“My specialty is escaping, after all.”

She sat down on the floating machine crystal <Machina> with a pwoof.

“Ohh, you can ride that?”

“It also serves as an emergency pod that accommodates one person. Rather than that, Sheltis, you need to attack the enemy general or we won’t win. You know that.”

“——Suicide attacker, right.”

The general holding out at the back would be Kagura and the central interceptors were Monica and Vaiel. And the duty assigned to him was front line enemy lines penetration.

“Start!”

At the same time that the instructor’s order came, four shadows flew out from the sand hill.

Two of them were approaching without hesitation while the other two were keeping their distance and circling around.

“The general is positioned in the back. It’s a standard formation with two up front and two in the back.“

“That’s convenient.”

Against their vanguard that consisted of two people, they also had two interceptors. Without significant difference in their battle strength, Kagura’s defense line wouldn’t fall. The only thing left was for him to engage the two in the rear guard in a solo suicide attack.

“……Let’s go.”

He broke into a run and accelerated.

He kicked off the sand and jumped, closing the distance between him and the opponent’s vanguard.

——Two people in the vangaurd.

——One used a rod and the other and the other wielded a metal cane. [T/N: The rod here is 昆 which is the same as in Monica's weapon name.]

Either of their weapons had long reach and were well-suited to high-speed movement during use.

Whooooosh.

The rods whipped up the sand and the metal cane came crashing down from above. It was a pincer strike. He blocked the rod and used the resultant impact to dodge the metal cane.

It was a momentary passing.

Passing by each other, they only exchanged glances as they ran.

……So they won’t pursue me.

There was no meaning in a showdown between vanguards in Open Flag. If they wasted time on a match between the vanguards it would only serve to heighten the chances of a draw. Both sides were only aiming for the general.

The rest was a battle against time.

Dashing up the hill, he chased after the two who were trying to widen the gap with him.

“One is a heavy spear guard and the other one is……“

Before the machine crystal <Ilis> could finish speaking, something silver flew over.

The thing shining with the sunlight showering it was a circular blade. On that large flat circular blade was a donut-like hole in the center. One, two, three of those drew arcs——

“Throwing steel <Chakram>, huh.”

A throwing weapon that resembles the full moon. They didn’t have much power on their own, but each circular blade was razor sharp so grasping their movements in midair was exceedingly difficult.

“Tch!”

He crossed his dual blades and matched them to the path of the throwing steel <Chakram> ——— and out came a dull grinding sound. He intercepted the incoming circular blades and smacked them to the sand.

……The sun is a nuisance.

The direct sunlight was beating down from above and reflecting off the ground. The enemy was aiming for the point where the two multiplied each other's effects so the already hard to see blades of the throwing steel <Chakrams> were made even harder to see.

"The enemy's general is a heavy spear guard. Taking out the defender first and then attacking the general is the safest course of action; the other means is a little riskier and involves just going straight for the general."

"Which one do you recommend?"

"If you weren't my master, it would be the safe method. But if you're aiming to be a Sennenshi, then it's the latter, and please do it with no injury in a swift breakthrough."

"……How nice of you to make it sound so easy!"

Replying with a fearless smile, Sheltis faced his feet in the direction of the heavy spear guard.

Directly to the side, the throwing steel <Chakram> user sent out the circular blades in one motion. Five throwing steel <Chakram> danced through the air and approached, each on a different path.

——There was no need to go out of his way to track the circular blades that were hard to see.

It would be fine if he just dodged according to the predicted paths. Of the five, three were just threatening shots that weren't actually meant to hit. He stared only at the two that were sure to hit and then.

Scraaaaaaape……!!

Each of his dual swords deflected one of the two throwing steel <Chakrams> back.

"!"

His two opponents' expressions trembled and their movements slightly stiffened up. He dashed, aiming for that moment. He passed and left behind the defending throwing steel <Chakram> user.

——What's left is the finisher.

"!"

The heavy spear guard readied a very long spear in both hands.

Even amongst metal spears, the heavy spear boasts an especially great range. If the opponent were of the same calibre, dual swords wouldn't be able to break through and he would get speared. It was that much of a bad match-up.

His opponent's skill was unknown. It would be fine if it was just simple Cadet Guard-level skill but if by chance it was Regular Guard-level, carelessly jumping in would entail the danger of being one-sidedly speared.

……If so.

He took a rough estimate of the heavy spear's length and came to abrupt stop just short of it.

A distance that was uncrossable with dual swords. Ignoring the doubt that crept onto his opponent's face, Sheltis swung down his sword at the sand below with all his strength.

Zaaaaaaaaaaaa……countless sand particles flew up into the air and completely shrouded the vision of Sheltis, the heavy spear guard and the throwing steel <Chakram> user who were in that area.

"Wha!?"

A confused voice was raised.

In the world veiled by a cloud of sand, Sheltis faced the heavy spear user, drew an arc and kicked off the sandy ground. Immediately after, with a whistle of the wind, he passed through the enemy's spear's right flank.

——As I thought.

The heavy spear guard thrust their spear out impatiently as a result of being blinded. If Sheltis kept going straight here, it would be a direct hit but he dared to take a roundabout route and the spear went in the wrong direction.

"Haa!"

Holding back his breath, he sliced up with his right-hand sword from directly below.

The sound of metal colliding echoed.

The uplifted cloud of sand silently lowered to the ground and in his vision that had cleared up——

The boy thrust his dual swords at the heavy spear and its user that had been blown back.

"Fumu, let's stop there."

Then came the reverberating order from the instructor that sounded like she hadn't found the battle enjoyable.

"The second unit will break up for today. Think up counter-measures for the second match tomorrow."

……Finally a single victory.

The first day of the second day of the screenings was finally over. He didn't think that the competition between units before the merit system mission would be this harsh.

"Good work."

"Ah, yeah. You too, Monica."

The girl with sakura-colored hair descended the sand dune towards him. There was sand clinging to where sweat had flowed on her cheek and there were sand-colored patches on her formal clothes here and there……

"Was it also hard being the interception?"

"We won so it's good result-wise but that was dangerous."

She nodded with a halfhearted expression. She pointed to the other end of the sand dune with her crossed rods <Rosario>, indicating someone who was nonchalantly chasing someone else——

“Hold on, Vaiel, why didn’t you protect me even though you were in the interceptor role?”

“Ha? You’re the one who said something like escaping was your specialty.”

Kagura sat atop her machine pearl <Machina> as she protested about something with Vaiel who had his face turned away.

“There’s a limit to everything. You can’t just keep running away! If Monica hadn’t been covered for in time, right about now——”

“Idiot, for I who is a man amongst men, I can’t get serious in this kind of unrefined match.”

“A man amongst men? Then you shouldn’t be ditching and should come to help. Protecting a frail lady is the beauty of that.”

“Hah! A brat with no sex appeal shouldn’t run her mouth off in some knowing tone. Protecting someone in this kind of safe match guided by regulations can’t decide a man’s worth. A man will only get involved and protect a woman in a large battle of life and death. That’s my belief.”

“A man who can’t protect in a match saying that isn’t trustworthy.”

“So when was there ever a need for you to trust me? Ah— it’s so hot, what an unbelievable pain in the ass that there’s another unit battle tomorrow.”

“Ah, wait a second!”

The girl followed after the young man who was getting more distant as if trying to run away.

……Umm, so what basically happened?

Judging from the conversation just now, he could somewhat imagine what had transpired just now.

“So it would be correct to say that Vaiel who was on interception duty didn’t do anything and so you had to do your best to defend her?”

“That’s a good guess. ……It looks like it’ll be the same tomorrow, so it’s giving me a headache.”

Fuu. Monica sighed deeply.

“Let’s make a plan in preparation for tomorrow. I had intended to divide up but if Vaiel is going to do nothing like that that then it would be for the best to think of a formation for the three of us.”

“Yeah. ……It’s best if you don’t push yourself too hard. I’ll make up for the slack.”

“I’ll take you up on that.”

Leaving behind a momentary smile, she left as well. It truly seemed to have been a harsh battle. That back didn’t have its usual energy.

……I see, for Monica.

……This was her first unit battle as unit leader.

“It’s obviously she’d also be mentally exhausted.“

“……That’s right.”

The responsibility of a unit leader. Monica’s worries would continue for a while longer. Depending on the situation, he might also have to think up a way to alleviate her burdens.

“Hey, Sheltis.”

Instructor Yumelda’s voice came from behind him.

“Do you have any external wounds? Still have energy? Okay then, we’ll start today’s training.”

“Tell me, how did it lead to that!?”

He hurriedly jumped aside to dodge the hand coming for the scruff of his neck.

“Ah, but I’m glad. I had something to ask you, instructor. About our fourth person.”

“Are you interested about Vaiel?”

“Well, yeah. ……He’s actually hiding some ridiculous ability, and I was just wondering why.”

“Fool, you’d understand from his actions. He’s only at the top of the lower half of the Cadets at best.”

It was conclusive and without any hidden meaning.

“If so —— why did you scout him?”

“……”

She lit her cigarette than was as thin as a needle and gazed at the flame.

“There are two qualities in a guard. There’s a need for at least one guy like that around.”

“……Eh?”

“There’s no loss in remembering this. Rather than the Priestesses atop the tower, there is also a man that is influenced by ‘something‘ completely different.”

I wonder what that means.

“I said you’d come to understand naturally, right. Rather than that, now’s training so let’s go so I can try the hellish training I thought up yesterday that I’ve been itching to test out.”

“……No, that’s why I said I”

“If you get careless, you’ll die. Now come along.”

“Like —— I —— said ——————!”

His arguments had no effect as he was caught by the scruff of the neck and dragged along the desert.

Part 7

Floor 11 of Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>, the Cadet Guard lodging.

“Even though I was tired from the unit battles, why does the instructor always prepare something to add on top!?”

“The instructor was quite lively!“

“……She had the greatest smile on her face.”

Carelessly replying, Sheltis dropped down onto his room’s bed. After he ate dinner on the 25th floor, took a shower and returned, it was already the dead of night.

“Look, Sheltis, the stars are beautiful.”

In the window —— the night sky that was shining like a tipped-over jewel box. Their respective radiances were meagre by themselves, which is exactly why they did not drown out each other and seemed to support each other as they shone.

“Ilis really likes stars.”

“Is it not romantic? I think they are the sole thing that goes on without changing.“

Ilis shined at the base of the pillow almost like a star.

“But you seem sleepy.“

“……I haven’t slept since yesterday. The main culprit is Kagura.”

Because of her lust for knowledge, he had been questioned by her since last night until the early morning, went through the first and second screenings and then taken the usual training from the instructor.

“Ilis, wake me up when it’s time to get up tomorrow.”

With that said, good night.

Lying face-down with his pillow hugged up to his eyes——

“Sheltis, come to my room now.”

“……Somebody, save me. A demon with a machine helmet is obstructing my sleep.”

“Who’s a demon?”

The one he could hear from the speaker at a corner of the ceiling was Kagura whom he'd just spoken of.

"Could it be another questioning session?"

"Of course not. Worry not, this time it won't take more than thirty minutes. There is something regarding tomorrow unit battle that I would like to consult you about. It's something I'd like to keep secret from Monica."

It was odd that Kagura wanted to consult him about the unit battles and even wanted to keep it secret from Monica.

"Is there a reason?"

"We'll talk at room 085 on floor 14, so could you come quickly?"

"Yeah, probably in a few minutes."

His usual shirt and black top were in the closet. He was currently in his room-use attire. They could also be used during training, so there would be no problem going out just like this.

"Then I shall be waiting. Ah yes, just one more thing."

"What is it?"

"I've called you out and it will be just us two. ……If you assault me, I will immediately press the emergency report button."

"Isn't that a little harsh when you've called me out!?"

Floor 14 of Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>.

"Sheltis, why are you acting this nervous?"

"It's because this is a girls-only floor."

Disregarding in the middle of the day, he had no idea what somebody would think if he were found in the middle of the night like this. They might overlook it if he explained his circumstances but it would be best to have no misunderstandings.

"By the way, it seems Leon almost met the same problem before. His was due to night patrolling but he was surrounded by female Cadet Guards who knew that."

"A molester uproar?"

"The opposite. The girls on the floor all came and gave him a hearty welcoming. 'How about tea in my room?', 'Rather, please stay over!'; with that popularity, it's an anecdote of how he was chased around and escaped."

"……That's unreasonable."

"He's good-looking and tall with the superior first-class swords skills of a Sennenshi, and to top it off he has a serious personality. Of course he'd be popular. Why don't you learn from him?"

“I’m not frustrated or anything!?……well, forget that. We’re here.”

Number 085 had a door that was just the exact same as every other room. The machine lock was also standard. That’s how it was even though her room at the Tower Control Bureau was different right from the door.

“……Unexpectedly, her room for sleeping is normal.”

“This room is regulated by the Defense Institution so even if I wanted to remodel it, the procedures are a pain.”

The voice from beyond the door.

“I’ll be opening it now, please come inside.”

——Authorized——

The door unlocked with an mechanical and electronic sound. The mechanical door slid to the side.

“You were pretty fast. Please come this way.”

“……I’ll be intruding.”

Just a few steps from the front door was the living room. Further in was a kitchen and path. It’s structuring was completely the same as the room allotted to men.

It was the same for the interior design.

On the floor was a warm-colored carpet. In the living room was a table, chair and bed, as well as a closet.

“This is also more normal than I expected.”

“Did you think that I would have bundles of documents and machine cords covering the floor?”

Kagura who answered with a serious face was also in a thin dressing gown. Perhaps it was also for sleeping as the faint yellow clothing was sewn with soft-looking fabric and there were frills attached at the collar and on the sleeves.

And there was one more thing that caught his eye more than anything else——

“You’re not wearing your mechanical helmet?”

“Yes. There’s no reason to hide it in my own room. And I just took a shower, so it would be too wet until my hair dries.”

Facing outward from her dark green hair were two long ears.

Wrapped in warm fur like a fox, they were the distinguishing characteristic of Nell folk like her. She didn’t like having other people see them so she would normally hide them.

……Ahh, I see.

She’d removed her mechanical helmet so she didn’t want to go outside, so she’d invited him to her room.

“Well, it’s already late for you, right? Let’s proceed straight to the main topic.”

There were two chairs at the circular table. Being invited over, Sheltis sat down in the seat opposite her.

“I’m going to say it plainly. Did you go easy in today’s unit battle?”

Even though it should have been simple.

It took him a little while to comprehend those words.

“……You mean me? No, I didn’t do something so obvious.”

Different from the actual combat that he did when he exchanged blows with Leon, he put in as much strength as he did in the morning training. If he didn’t do that, his skills would rust.

“But when you fought with Maha, your movements weren’t like this.”

The gaze of her clear black eyes seemed to pierce through him.

“Fue? Who’s this Maha?“

“I’ll show you the recording, so please stay put for a little.”

She connected the machine pearl <Machine> with machine crystal <Ilis> and left them on the floor. In any case, with this he should stay quiet on things to say for a little bit.

“……That fight with Maha wasn’t a situation to hold back in.”

Even within his numerous experiences with actual combat, ‘Maha‘ was in a different class. Boasting inhuman strength on those grasslands, and with just a puppet; being such, just how strong the real one was……he couldn’t even imagine.

“And that was a real battle, so it was done with spirit.”

“It’s not a problem of spirit or conscience. I wanted to voice a different cause. There is a more frank and concrete reason.”

Putting both her elbows on the table, the Nell girl held each hand in the other.

“This is what I think. I think you were unconsciously tense.”

“……Which means?”

“You’re not used to it, right? Rather than battles where you guard other people, you’re not used to battles with other people supporting you —— how about it?”

Things that pertained to that meaning arose in his mind.

“……”

Without himself realizing it, Sheltis stared at the ceiling.

……That might be true.

It was already something from however many years ago. The time he had just enlisted.

He had been paired with Leon until he became a Regular Guard, so they had been able to act as they liked.

When he became an Elite Guard as well, he was surrounded by people of superior ability. There was no need for support; rather, it felt embarrassing to have to request support.

——I have no experience in battles where I'm receiving support.

It was exactly as Kagura had said.

"……I understand but"

The past and now are different. Because Leon wasn't in his unit.

Monica's true worth was in combining her crossed rods <Rosario> with her Shinryoku arts and Kagura was completely a support type. There would be no hope for the unit's growth if they were not making the best of their specialties.

"That's right, you understand in theory as well. But that backfired today."

That was about today's unit battle.

"You moved while being conscious of Monica who was in the center and I who was in the very back, right? We can assume your thoughts of 'I have to cover the both of them' were too strong so they hindered your movements."

Small hindrances would pile up to become great strain. The strain only from sensing Kagura at a location away from him. That was surely something greater than he had thought.

[Crossed his dual blades and matched them to the path of the throwing steel <Chakram>——]

Kagura quickly wrote an "x" sign on the white paper above the table.

"Even though there was only one throwing steel <Chakram> that time, you receive it with both swords. But you shouldn't have needed to. With the skill you showed me in the battle with Maha, even if you ignored it you would have been able to deflect it with one sword."

But why didn't he do that?

"The answer is simple. You didn't see the throwing steel <Chakram> at that time. Instead of deflecting it with one hand, you were watching both of us who were behind you, right?"

"……That was just once."

"That's right. But I think that's enough. It is normal for the attacks to concentrate on the general in the Open Flag format. ——And the precedent for the real issue ends here."

She stayed from for a moment and her gaze became icy.

“In tomorrow’s unit battle, I would like you to help Monica.”

“Help……you don’t mean just covering for her, right?”

“As you suspect, I mean my instructions in the midst of battle. Those with the leeway to observe their surroundings during battle probably consists of only you. ……It’s a shameless thing to ask but I’d like you to decide the commands for everyone to respond well. I would like you to give orders.”

While touching her extended out ears, Kagura continued.

“The unit’s leader is Monica, but in actual combat, you are the one who can best control the unit’s flow. I think Monica can also do it if she becomes used to it but it’s too much to expect from her when just became a unit leader.”

The first unit battle with first-time members and a first-time unit leader. Monica was dealing with all these first times. There was an unknown amount of pressure on that back.

“There are other things only Monica can do, after all.”

“That’s right. Applying for the creation of a new unit entails creating the name registry and contact list as well as the application to the Defense Institution, and other things.”

But the most important is……of course, the gathering of unit members like us. I am, as expected of my personality, not meticulous. Since you also want to hide your past from others, it’s hard to lead a unit, right?”

Nobody else could command the unit except Monica. There was no other choice but to depend on her.

——That’s why I will support her.

——Each of the unit members would, in things other than that, in areas they specialized in.

“So you’re saying the unit battle is my task.”

“Yes. If we expand it, that includes all of our battles as a unit. I will support in the area of information gathering for all things I can’t help with in that area.”

Kagura nodded.

“You are not used to battles where you receive support. You are confused so it’s an obvious result that your movements become constrained. But I would like you to adapt to it. We require your support and you will make the best of our support —— that kind of battle style.”

“……I’ll do my best.”

He had intended to recognize that requirement but he had felt it for real in today’s unit battle. It would take time to get used to this kind of battle.

……It’s quite harsh with only me at the front lines right now.

While fighting at the far front lines as an attacker, he had to keep Monica who was at the middle and Kagura who was at the very back in mind. As Kagura had pointed out, his movements were being hindered by that right now. [T/N: Attacker

here is 特攻 which is the same as "suicide attacker" from before. The only difference is that the author stuck "アタッカー" on top of it. Suicide attacker <attacker> sounds retarded, so it's just "attacker" now. It's probably gonna continue (kudos to the next line).]

If only there was at least one more attacker.

“……Vaiel is”

“We can’t expect much of him. Just having him participate in the unit battle is a big step forward.”

The Nell folk girl just shook her head.

“Hey.”

“Are you wondering why I value him that much?”

He wordlessly assented. Doing so,

“That’s right.”

The expression of the girl suddenly broke down after she turned her head to the side. Her eyes that seemed to be nostalgic about and regretting something, mixed with holding back tears about something important——

“……It’s because I thought he was a good person. Is that bad?”

It was a strange and sad voice that sounded like a laugh.

“But……we fought after today’s unit battle. Why didn’t you protect me, I said.”

“Ahh, that was just simple communication.”

“That was?”

“Yes. He answered you properly, right? He said he’d also come for tomorrow’s unit battle.”

[So when was there ever a need for you to trust me? Ah— it's so hot, what an unbelievable pain in the ass that there's another unit battle tomorrow.]

“……That had that kind of meaning?”

“He didn’t say anything about how to interpret it. It’s just me interpreting it as I like.”

Kagura chuckled and smiled with a cheerful look.

“Even saying that, that’s not enough proof. ……Then I shall tell one story from a long time ago.”

The girl told him.

That was a story from almost two years ago. An episode about a certain Cadet Guard.

“It’s well-known, but there is training that consists of running across the entirety of the desert field.”

“Yeah, that’s……”

The first day when Sheltis had just enlisted, that was the task the instructor had assigned to him. It was harsh training where a great deal of the newcomer Cadet Guards had retired partway.

“It wasn’t on the day of the enlisting ceremony, but there was a day when that was part of the regular training menu. ……A girl participated in that. For the girl who was normally a computer systems researcher, it had been a long time since she’d undergone training.”

That was none other than Kagura.

There was nobody else who was a researcher and a Cadet Guard at the same time.

“The girl who wasn’t used to training collapsed after running half of the hot sand area. It wasn’t heatstroke or anything, she just didn’t have the vitality……and normally it would end there with an instructor or relief squad helping her but it was different that day. The Cadet Guard who came from behind her piggybacked her and ran across the hot sand, carrying her all the way to the medical office.”

“…….”

“And the Cadet Guard who had carried the girl to the medical office also reached his limit and collapsed the instant they arrived. Say, he’s an interesting person, right?”

Those eyes that communicated that were smiling just a little sadly.

“The image of that time is probably strong. Even though he was saying that it’s such a pain, it’s such a pain, he would help someone when they were truly troubled. ……She came to think that.”

Being gazed at by those unblinking eyes, his words wouldn’t come out.

——Was that Vaiel?

He who kept saying everything was a pain and didn’t do anything during the afternoon’s unit battle?

“That there was such an old story, it would suffice if you just remember it for now.”

Narrowing her eyes in nostalgia, Kagura stood up.

“……I’m counting on you to keep this story a secret from Monica, okay?”

The girl said that in a calm voice.

Part 8

The edges of the sky were being dyed red.

In the blink of an eye, the stars were also hidden somewhere. As if a black canvas had been painted over with red, this was the time the heavens slowly changed to the color of dawn.

“Today is the crucial part of the unit battles.”

Taking a break from flexibility exercises that stretched the elbow, Monica muttered that to herself.

“It seems there were twenty-two units that applied for mission 16. It was narrowed down to 14 in the first screening and from there, two units with high scores from the second screening will advance to the final screening, huh.”

There were a total of four battles planned for the second screening.

A win was three points and a draw was one. It was set up so the two teams with the highest scores after four battles would proceed to the final screening.

……We won yesterday, so we’re at three points.

“Monica, what happens if three or more teams end up with the same amount of points?”

He had been curious about the other units, but Sheltis didn’t have that kind of time yesterday.

“……That’s possible. They’d probably add another unit battle in. We have to leave excess strength in the odd chance that does happen.”

“By the way, it seems to have become even simpler than that.“

The machine crystal <Ilis> swaying at his chest deliberately made a sudden interjection.

“If you win the first match today, you’ll pass the second screening. There are only four units with all wins, so these four teams will fight each other in the first match and the winner will advance.“

“……That’s strange. I asked Instructor Yumelda about the number of applications yesterday. There should be at least fourteen units in the second screening.”

Stopping her flexibility exercises, Monica tilted her head.

“About that——“

“The teams who lost and tied yesterday all withdrew their applications. The ones left are only us and the teams who won yesterday.”

Wordlessly continuing her flexibility exercises, Kagura lifted her head.

“Fourteen unit battles were conducted with five of them reaching conclusions and two ending in a draw. At this point in time, everybody except the five units that won seem to have given up on this mission.”

“Ah, I see.”

Putting together Kagura and Ilis’ words, Sheltis also came to see the current situation.

The second screening used a system where the collective results of four unit battles would decide the outcome.

However, with a loss in yesterday's single battle, it would be difficult to come out on top. Then they would give up on this mission and apply for another —— it was an experienced decision.

"There were five teams that won yesterday but one of the main members in one of those teams was injured. As a result, four teams are left. If we win once more, we can proceed to the final screening."

"……We can't lose, huh."

"The opposing unit should also be thinking the same thing. They will absolutely not be off-guard."

"Of course."

Monica re-tied her vivid and long hair.

"Can we do it with the same setup as yesterday?"

"I'm good. Kagura?"

Yes —— with a nod, the girl with the mechanical helmet got onto the machine pearl <Machina>.

"Kagura's also fine. And the last one is Vaiel."

Vaiel still hadn't shown up. Monica had told him it would be early in the morning at the training grounds but doing something so troublesome —— it seemed like he would flat-out refuse it.

"Sheltis, rather than about him, this is about you."

Getting Monica's attention, Kagura whispered into her ear.

"Our deal with him is only that he enters the unit battles to meet the person count requirement. It's that kind of promise. Whether we win this unit battle depends on you."

"……I understand."

Different from three years ago, it was combat as a member of a unit who would receive support. While affirming the battle situation, he would also be expected to issue orders in place of the unit leader.

——For the sake of Monica who is a first-time unit leader.

——The battle that is a first for me as well is waiting.

"Are you nervous?"

In response to the question posed by machine crystal <Ilis>, he unconsciously made a wry smile.

"A little."

It was different from when he was a Cadet Guard or a Regular Guard and his competitive battles with Leon.

It was also different from his solo battling as an Elite Guard.

The first time he would fight like this. To add to that, he hadn't thought about how it would be during an important step in slipping into the Governmental Sector.

"If you focus too much on how you're not used to it, the unit will fall into a predicament, so just avoid that."

"……I know, I have to put winning as the first priority."

Sheltis looked at his hand that was slightly sweaty for a little while.

Part 9

"Ymy-sama, excuse me."

The girl saluted courteously.

With a sharp gaze and countenance, her deep blue suit suited her tall and slender body.

"He-hello, Instructor Yumelda!"

Stopping her hand that was shoving clothes into a travel bag, Ymy looked back in hurry.

A certain Priestess' private room on the 287th floor of Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>. It was unusual that the instructor who usually drilled Cadet Guards outside the tower would take the trouble to come here.

"Sorry for coming during your precious relaxation time. Is this a good time?"

"O-of course. Ah, go ahead and sit."

"Don't mind it. This will only take a few minutes."

At the spot immediately after entering the room, the instructor corrected her posture. Behind her was one more person, a girl with dazzling blonde hair that was bound into two locks was on standby. Her age was……probably one above or two below her own. Her upper garment was the formal clothes of the guards and the bottom was a pleated skirt.

"Our business is regarding the matter with the Governmental Sector that will be coming up before long. The matter for which you will be traveling."

"……That matter?"

She unconsciously fixed her posture.

"First of all, your escort has been officially decided. The Cadres Guard will be in charge of that. Her abilities as a guard are assured so please be at ease for the journey."

"——I understand."

It was rare for Instructor Yumelda to praise someone. The Cadres Guard was a person whose skills were such that even the instructor recognized them.

"……Perhaps"

The one standing behind the instructor on standby, that Elite Guard——

"Ahh, no, it's misleading, but she's not her. The introduction is late, but this is the Regular Guard I'sa. The blood-related younger sister of the Elite Guard that will be traveling with you."

"My name is I'sa. I am pleased to make your acquaintance."

She grabbed the ends of her skirt and respectfully curtsied.

"Y-yes. I'm also glad to meet you! I'm also counting on your for the Governmental Sector……h-huh?……But just now, you said younger sister. I'sa-san is……the younger sister?"

Not the Cadres Guard herself, the instructor had specifically brought a relative of hers with her for the greetings?

"There's a reason for that."

The instructor took out a cigarette from her pocket. While putting that in her mouth,

"We're currently in the middle of choosing the Cadet Guards who will be traveling with you. We've whittled it down to the last two units but the last test will be proctored by I'sa here. That's what it is."

And the Regular Guard that saw that frowned slightly.

"That's no good, instructor, you can't smoke in front of a Priestess."

"I haven't lit it. I can't settle down if I don't have something in my mouth."

She was a heavy smoker so she obstinately kept her smoking habits. [T/N: Habits is originally etiquette. I find that makes no sense though.]

Of course Ymy was also aware of that. She saw that she wasn't going to light it so she hadn't pointed it out.

"Nash, and Monica —— there's no need to memorize the unit leaders' names but the plan is to have one of the teams they lead accompany you on the journey."

"……Monica?"

"Oh, is there something"

"Ah, n-no, no, no, no! I-it's nothing. It's fine!"

Being looked at by the instructor who had her head tilted, Ymy frantically waved her hands.

……Monica……Monica is a girl's name, right.

……Is that my……the name of the person who was my senpai?

[We might meet in an unexpected place, you know?]

[See you, Ymy, I'll be cheering you on to becoming an outstanding Priestess.]

Is it a coincidence?

Is there such a coincidence?

"Then I shall make a quick report. We will have the final screening in two days, so the introduction of the unit's members will wait until the day after."

"U-um, Instructor Yumelda? Could I ask you something strange?"

"What is it?"

"Umm, what kind of teams do you see the two teams as?"

……I wanted to know more about the person called Monica.

It couldn't be helped that her heart was pounding since the moment she heard that name.

"Fumu. Let's see, Monica's unit was just formed. It's a team that still needs looking after……I'm a little worried about their teamwork and cooperation but it's a unit that's achieved complete victory for the unit battles."

She took out the scoring sheet from her chest pocket. Confirming the results which were written in elegant strokes, Instructor Yumelda gave an unusual wry smile.

“Ah, umm……so this Monica person is truly that strong?”

“Monica is an older sister character who’s good at looking after people. Her accomplishments as a guard aren’t outstanding or bad. In essence, the one pulling up the unit’s level is a single dual sword user. That boy has trained for a long time……if it’s just in his battle ability, he could blow away the entire opposing team all by himself.”

“I-is that so?”

……A dual sword wielding boy……ahh, I’m glad.

……Sheltis is also there as promised. Just one more until we can go together.

She pat her chest as she put the good news she’d heard to heart.

Leon had also said that the competition for the expeditionary mission to the Governmental Sector was harsh so she’d been worried that Sheltis might have lost in random happening.

……Hmm? But, but, wait a second?

……That basically means that Monica-senpai and Sheltis are in the same unit?

“And so saying,”

The sharpness of the instructor’s eyes multiplied.

They seemed to see into the deepest parts of her heart.

“We cannot decide the superiority of a unit based on their strength in battle. The unit that excels in control and discipline of the entire unit is Nash’s and their balance is good. Opposite that, the members of Monica’s team are too strong individually. Their cooperation is also superficial.”

“Yes. To tell the truth, I am uneasy letting them travel together with Ymy-sama.”

This was the person that she knew was like a lump of cooperation.

……So like she thought, it was a different Monica-san?

“Fumu. Then would you like to meet them?”

“Eh?”

“If you would like to, I will introduce you to the two units. Don’t worry, this is also prior inspection. We can’t choose a unit that’s rude to the Priestess, after all.”

Part 10

The steep and hard slope of bedrock and the precipitous cliff just below it.

What made up their footing were countless rocks of varying size. From those the size of a palm to gigantic ones that surpassed an adult’s height, they were placed without consideration, forming an area that one could barely walk on.

“……The theme is a mountain, huh.”

He took a deep breath as he looked over the tall mountain field. Sitting down on a jutting out rock, Sheltis put away his dual swords into their holders.

——Unit battles, complete.

The time taken was twenty four minutes and seven seconds. It was victory by surrender of the enemy general. The battle’s conclusion wasn’t dangerous, but getting to it couldn’t be said to have been easy.

“Ah~ jeez, that’s why I’m asking you why you didn’t protect me! Where can you find a comrade who ditches the general! This time was really, really dangerous!?” [T/N: "General" and "me" are used interchangeably here. What I mean is "大将" (general) is the kanji and "わたし" (I/me) is the reading given for it.]

“You mean I’d shield you and take attacks? Don’t be stupid, I’d get hurt doing that.”

From a cliff a ways away came Kagura’s angry voice and opposite to that was Vaiel who was about to descend with an expression that showed that he thought it was a pain.

“I’m tired so I’m gonna sleep.”

“Eh, no, wait. This is where we go over the battle or have a meeting.”

“Do that between you fellow guards that get along well. See ya.”

The blond young man immediately descended the slope. Even if they went out of their way to invite him, it would just make it worse —— having come to that conclusion, Sheltis sighed and watched him go.

“It was a great effort.“

“Is that sarcasm?”

“Oh, how cruel. I meant it as positive encouragement.“

Machine crystal <Ilis> said nonchalantly.

“You said it yourself, that there are a mountain of problems.” [T/N: 課題は山積み means "the theme is a mountain" and "there are a mountain of problems".]

“……I guess.”

He put his elbows on his knees and propped his head up.

Sheltis was the solo suicide attacker at the far front lines. Monica who was at the center was stalled by one person and Kagura who was the general was chased around by the enemy’s pursuit from beginning to end.”

“Somehow……it felt like a dispersed battle.”

“Victory had the highest priority this time so I don’t think you need to worry that much about it. Kagura also said it, that it would be fine even if you didn’t adapt immediately.“

Unusually, machine crystal <Ilis> also had a considerate tone.

——Which means it was that far away from ideal.

Result-wise, it was a victory by crushing the enemy unit’s general. However, that was a victory gained through solo conduct, it was not a victory made by combining the unit’s strength.

“What needs to be done is regarding the orders that will allow Monica and Kagura to best utilize their abilities. I understand what I need to do but it’s not working.”

He looked for a flat rock and lay down face-up. He reached up a hand towards the azure sky that was showing through a crack.

……Yeah, it’s really difficult.

While he was moving around in order to give them orders, he was also taking orders from them. That was the ideal and it was his duty to facilitate it in practice.

“But in reality, the only one with the leeway to look around at his ally’s movements is you. For Monica who’s burdened with the duties of a unit leader, you have to support her burden in combat.“

“Yeah. I tried just now and……yeah.”

If he paid too much attention to Monica and Kagura’s movements, he’d be distracted from his own and his movements would become dull. Making the unit’s cooperation and his personal strength coexist. He didn’t think it would be this difficult.

……This will be my assignment for a while, huh.

A cloud like cotton torn to pieces. He absentmindedly chased with his eyes it as it rode on the wind.

“Were you injured anywhere?”

A shadow cut across the middle of his vision.

“No, I’m thinking. The answer isn’t coming out at all.”

“……The instructor is calling. If you’re fine, please get up.”

Monica lightly brushed aside her sakura-colored bangs. He took her outstretched hand and she pointed down the slope.

“It seems we’re to gather at floor 269 of the tower……what about Vaiel?”

“He said he was tired and went back.”

“I thought so. Then let’s go by ourselves; Kagura also said she was going to organize her machine pearl <Machina>’s recorded data and will catch up later.”

The slope formed from countless giant rocks. Sheltis followed after her as she jumped from boulder to boulder descending the slope.

……Floor 269 of Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>?

The highest floor an ordinary guard could enter. It was an important floor for important meetings that included the Priestesses and Sennenshi. It was not a floor Cadet Guards like them used.

"That the instructor called us to that floor……did something happen?"

He muttered to answer himself and stared down the steep slope.

Part 11

Floor 269 of Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>, the floor for meetings.

The path that returned to silence was without a single person and had the atmosphere of an empty husk.

"Is this place always this quiet?"

Behind him, Monica looked around as if it had just struck her.

"It a room for important meetings so with the door it's completely airtight. No matter how loud the meetings get, it won't be heard out in the passage."

"You know quite a bit, huh?"

"Ah……y-yeah. Ilis told me before."

I used this floor a lot back when I was an Elite Guard three years ago —— not saying that, Sheltis came up with some reason for it.

"Rather than that, look. Probably after rounding this corner……"

They progressed just as was written on the electronic map. After turning however many corners, the recognized figure of a female instructor in a deep blue suit was standing there.

"The other two?"

With one glance over here, Instructor Yumelda raised an eyebrow.

"Kagura is servicing her machine pearl <Machina> and Vaiel is……getting treatment for his wounds."

"There's no need for worry. He's skipping anyway, right? It's as I expected."

The instructor looked sullen as she chewed up the end of her cigarette.

"Well, whatever. At any rate, I've formally received notice of your passing the second screening. If you pass the final screening, you'll be cleared to take on mission 16 and journey to the Governmental Sector."

“Yes, ye—s, one question! When is the final screening?“

Machine crystal <Ilis> asked in a carefree tone. The instructor also didn’t mind that and,

“It will be from the day after tomorrow over a period of three days. Meet up at the training grounds at nine in the morning and I’ll introduce you to the proctor and the opposing unit.”

A selection test that took place over three days and even had a proctor. It was difficult to think of a unit battle taking that long. It was also unlikely that they’d have a written or interview at this point. What he could think of was——

“Patrol defense of the nature district or a practical of VIP escorting, one of these?”

“Sheltis, look forward to tomorrow’s announcement.”

The instructor played dumb with a happy smile. From the expression, it wasn’t a problem of which was correct but what would happen within them.

“We’ll disperse here for today. Do independent training —— or so I’d like to say.”

She took out a communicator from her breast pocket,

“……It’s me. ……Yes, that’s right. They’re gathering right now, please come at your convenience.”

Their superior was reporting something in an unusually polite way to someone.

Who could it be? Someone that this instructor would be that polite to……a bureau chief? No, there’s no reason for her to contact a bureau chief. Then someone from the guards. Considering that for many of the Elite Guards she was originally their instructor narrowed it down to those above that.

In other words, a Sennenshi, or possibly——

“A Priestess?”

Monica who kept silent nodded and gulped.

Yes. If one considered that Instructor Yumelda had specifically told them to assemble within the tower, he or she would eventually reach this conclusion.

“You guys are aware that you’ll be traveling with a Priestess for mission number 16.”

She put the communication device away in her breast pocket and looked over with a remarkably sharp look.

“Well, then. Whether a Cadet Guard will do something rude in front of a Priestess, we had the intention of having a surprise inspection now. Before the important journey to the Governmental Sector.”

“……Huh? But you’re not supposed to say that be”

There was no meaning in it being a surprise.

“I said we had the intention of inspecting. I was worried about Vaiel, you see. If that problem child isn’t here, there’s no point in holding the inspection, right? Well, in exchange it’d be good if you received one or two encouragements from the Priestess ——— there, speak of the devil.”

Ring came a sound like a bell.

The high-speed elevator before them came to a halt and slowly opened left and right.

“Ymy-sama, I’ll introduce them to you. Here is the unit leader,”

“Monica-senpai!”

“That’s right, Monica-senpai……senpai?”

In front of the instructor who dropped her cigarette, the girl who came out of the elevator ran in small steps to Monica.

“I knew I was right! Senpai……Monica-senpai, right!?”

Letting her off-gold hair fly, it was the vestment-clad Ymy.

Running to the girl wearing formal attire with a bounce in her step, and still with that vigor —— the Priestess took the hand of the Cadet Guard.

“H-hya!?”

The surprised voice came from Monica who had her hand grabbed.

“Senpai, when did you become a guard? Why, why didn’t you tell me!”

“Eh……ah,……um……ah……u……?……th-this is……you’re wro”

Ymy’s voice was lively with happiness. But the one whose hand was being held wasn’t moving and her face color was switching back and forth between pale and bright red.

“……Ilis, what does this mean?”

“Please don’t ask me.“

He watched over those two for a little while and——

“Hey, Sheltis.”

The instructor whispered into his ear.

“Is Monica an acquaintance of Ymy-sama?”

“……Well, that’s what I what to know.”

He didn’t understand what was happening. He didn’t know too much about Monica from her days as an apprentice Priestess. Even Kagura probably wasn’t too clear on it.

“Fumu. Then it’s best to leave them alone. I’ll be returning so I’ll leave the rest to you.”

“Eh, wa-wait? That’s just shoving the bothersome stuff on——”

“I won’t hear excuses. Report how it goes afterwards later.”

“Are all adults this unfair!?”

By the time he raised a shout, the instructor had already rounded the bend at the crossroads.

“……Why me.”

“Isn’t it fine. Come, rather than that, look in front, in front. Pay attention.“

Following machine crystal <Ilis>’ words, he turned to the front and.

“Monica-senpai!? Hey, why haven’t you said anything since a while ago!?”

“Ah……um……err……that is”

Over there was a really —— oppressive expression worn on the face of the Priestess who was pushing back the girl with sakura-colored hair, and had been cornered her right up to the wall.

“I’ve been lonely ever since senpai left! Even so, why!”

“……Th-that is……em……emba……rra, ssing.”

“Eh? Em?”

The excited Ymy hadn’t heard that. She closed in to the person in question until their faces were almost touching.

“Senpai? Um, your face is totally red?”

“……Hauu!?”

Monica seemed to be enduring something as she kept silent and hung her head. And then,

“She-Sheltis! I’m going to check up on Kagura. I’ll also inform Vaiel about tomorrow……I won’t be back for a while!”

She turned her head to the side and shook off Ymy’s hand and ran away with intense vigor.

“Eh? Ah, wa……wait, Monica-senpai!”

“……!”

She seemed to hesitate for a moment and turned around but immediately after, she ran off again.

This time she didn’t stop. She was even too impatient to wait for the elevator doors to open, so she descended the emergency stairs at the edge of the floor as if tumbling down them.

The floor once again became silent.

The ones left were himself and Ymy who was watching the back of Monica who had left.

“……”

That girl contracted her shoulders and stood there looking extremely lonely.

“Sorry, Sheltis. I showed you a bad side of me……”

After a little while, his childhood friend turned to him with a calm feeling about her.”

“……I wonder why. Even though she was that kind of a senpai before.”

“You mean Monica, right?”

Ymy affirmed it with a nod.

“Excuse me. I’d like to confirm but Monica-senpai —— would mean your senpai as an apprentice Priestess, am I correct in assuming?“

“Yeah……she was a very kind senpai and my aspiration.”

A long time ago, it was something he had heard as foolish gossip. The relationships of apprentice Priestesses were not actually that good. They were fellow competitors in aiming to be a Priestess until the bitter end.

That’s why having a companion as an apprentice Priestess held great meaning.

“Monica-senpai took the final test for a Priestess three years ago. But she failed right at the very end and quit as an apprentice Priestess……and about what happened after that, she didn’t tell me no matter how much I asked.”

“——Because she wanted to become a guard.”

He told it to the downcast Ymy just as he’d heard from the person herself.

There was no reason for her to hide that she’d become a guard. After all, Ymy would probably have recognized that when she saw her in her formal clothes.

“Even if she couldn’t become a Priestess, she said she wanted to be in a position to defend the Priestesses. That’s what I heard.”

“Yeah……it sounds like something senpai would say.”

To his childhood friend who was being bashful with a nostalgic expression,

“Say, this is just my thinking but”

Sheltis told her the impression he’d felt just as-is.

“Wasn’t Monica embarrassed?”

“……Embarrassed?”

“Monica has been a Cadet Guard for three whole years. That she just couldn’t become a Regular Guard, she herself is very mindful of that. That’s why probably —— she wanted to keep it a secret and clearly tell you when she became a Regular Guard.”

Her expression when she had been approached by Ymy. Her face went bright red and trembled, and although her words had gotten stuck, it was definitely not an expression of dislike.

“She just wasn’t mentally prepared and was surprised to meet you.”

She wanted to meet her but the time wasn’t right. She had decided that in her heart but hadn’t thought that Ymy would be the one to approach her.

“……That’s, right.”

Ymy strained her voice so she could hear herself say it.

“Yeah, that’s definitely it. Because Monica-senpai is a kind person. Not just me, she was someone who always looked after all the other apprentice Priestesses.”

“Yeah, that’s right. That’s why I think you don’t have to worry, Monica hasn’t changed.”

Sheltis didn’t know the Monica of three years ago. But he somehow understood, Monica’s base hadn’t changed at all from her time as an apprentice Priestess.

“She’s quite misfortunate. She was Ymy’s senpai as an apprentice Priestess and is the leader of Sheltis’ unit as a guard.“

“Ah, as I expected? The one who invited Sheltis into a unit was Monica-senpai. No, that’s not it, as I expected, Monica-senpai has a discerning eye!”

Folding her arms in a satisfied manner, Ymy had an expression of coming to some conclusion about something on her own. Or so he thought, but she —— opened her eyes as if having just realized something.

“Sheltis?”

“Mm, what is it? Changing like that.”

“……Monica-senpai is kind, right?”

“It’s as you just said. I wonder, maybe it’s possible to call it seeing into someone.”

For Kagura and him, either one was a Cadet Guard isolated from other units. The one who involved them who were like that was her.

“……Th-that’s right!……”

“Is there something wrong?”

“U-um……Monica-senpai is a beautiful person. ……Her skin is really white and beautiful and her hair is also a wonderful color, and her style is also smart, right?”

“I don’t understand anything about skin though——”

Maybe it was the result of her efforts in training, her entire body gave off the impression of being without excess. Her well-arranged sharp looks let one feel the intensity of her will and her momentary smiles in embarrassing times were also lovely.

“Yeah, it’s probably just as you said.”

“·····That’s right—. Even I see senpai as wonderful.”

Haa, sighed Ymy.

“? What’s wrong?”

“Sheltis!”

Slowly balling her hands, Ymy took one step forward.

“·····Wh-what is it suddenly?”

“Y-you can’t! No matter how cute senpai is……th-that is……you can’t just look at only senpai!”

“Come again?”

Ymy whose face was as red as a cherry didn’t stop.

“·····E-even if she asks you to, you can’t! A lap pillow……like L-Leon isn’t allowed! Do-don’t misunderstand. This isn’t me having a guilty conscience……umm, this is a problem of the mental health of the character of a guard——”

·····A lap pillow? Like Leon? The mental health of one’s character?

“Err, Ymy? Sorry, I don’t understand what you’ve been saying since just now.”

“Th-that’s all! Th-then I’ll be going now!”

Just saying everything by herself, she quickly waved her vestment.

“Eh……ehh! That one-sidedly!? That’s why I’m asking what you meant!”

“I don’t know, I don’t know, I don’t know anything————!”

For some reason, his childhood friend dashed off with a expression that seemed like she was going to cry.

Sheltis chased after her.

“People’s thoughts are complicated.“

Only machine crystal <Ilis> who had seen the entire thing from start to finish was worrying endlessly in a circle.

Interlude – Gathering

Floor 288 of Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>.

A height of two thousand metres. Closer to the heavens than the ground, that floor held the personal rooms of the second and third Priestesses as well as their respective Sennenshi.

At the center of the floor was a balcony that gathered sunlight. One could even enjoy sunbathing in the dead of winter within this area that was enclosed by transparent strengthened glass.

Upon that balcony which was large enough to even accommodate dancing.

"Ah, right there, Ran……a little lower……yeah, there. A little stronger—"

"Good grief, you're really a Priestess with a lot of demands."

It was a Priestess lying atop the air cushion spread out on the floor and the Sennenshi that was continuing to massage her shoulders and back.

"Ah— that feels good. Ran's really good at massages—"

"It's thanks to a certain somebody's demands being so particular."

Ran had the sleeves of her formal attire rolled up as she continued to massage.

She was a girl whose flaxen-colored hair stood out against her sunburnt skin. Her petite features and somewhat larger mischievous eyes gave one the impression of a cat.

……The trick is not to push or rub the muscles, with a sensation like lightly pinching and pulling.

……Was this how it went?

She located the shoulder blade from above the vestments and alleviated the tension in the muscles supporting the bone. From the center of the shoulder blade to the back and from there to the waist. She had only been average in just about everything at the very start, but after doing it how many times, she felt that she had gotten the knack of it. It was work that required attention but hearing her say "It feels good" made it not so bad.

"It looks like it was quite tiring."

"Yep—. It's hard maintaining the barrier. I don't have any intention of complaining though—."

The tall girl closed her eyes, laying down while looking like she was feeling good.

Meimel In Carnation —— a woman with vivid, long jade green hair and a tall and slender body.

Her vestments were tailored in an elegant style that suited her beautiful looks.

……Well, I should indulge her desires at least this much.

She had just finished maintaining the barrier for three days in place of the Queen. Massaging her for an hour when she had finished her duties as a Priestess was cheap as a reward.

"Oka—y, Ran, please put on suntan cream—"

Or so she thought, but then Meimel stripped off her vestment.

"……You're confusing this with a beach, aren't you."

"It's fine, isn't it. It feels great to sunbathe—"

"……You should get baked at least once."

To begin with, Sennenshi were protectors. Performing a massage to relieve weariness was one thing but rubbing on sunblock was odd.

"Don't you have any better requests?"

"In that case—, I want to eat sweet things."

As if anticipating that, the outstretched Meimei faced in her direction.

"Please, Ran. I'd like a parfait."

"The Tower's Grand Dining Hall's?"

"Nope. Outside the tower, there's a well-known store in the Living Districts. I'd like the head chef's original recipe, the <Red Hot Boiling Ice Parfait>, from the outdoor cafe in the second Living District, The Two Swans <Albireo>."

"I can't tell if that parfait is hot or cold."

"Rather, it's not a parfait but a pancake."

"……That name's a scam."

Sighing wearily, Ran began preparations to head out for shopping.

"Ha—i, sorry to keep you waiting."

Mixed in with the hustle and bustle of the main street, there was a shop filled with the scent of refined tea and the light and sweet fragrance of cakes.

Outdoor cafe, "The Two Swans <Albireo>" —— a coffee lounge that looked out at the main street in the second Living District.

Facing the ever-busy street that ran through the shopping district, it was a shop that was packed all day with people that loved the head chef's famous daily special meals and cakes.

"Here is the <Red Hot Boiling Ice Parfait> that you ordered."

"Ohh, so this is the rumored one."

At an outdoor table on large plates were enormous pancakes fit for ten people. The fresh cream and ice cream was overflowing on top, and above that was a mountain of seasonal fruits.

That came atop a piping hot iron pan, so there was plenty of impact. [T/N: That's a teppan, or a flat iron plate that you cook on. http://www.semitrad.com/img/teppan_06.jpg. The impact here is a feeling. Kinda like the impact you would feel if you opened the door and saw Mil-tan from High School DxD standing there.]

"……Wow, it's more than I expected."

"Are you a first-time customer? I'm the head chef, Kyrie; feel free to patronize us from today on."

The woman wearing an apron with an adorable dog applique gave a small nod.

With her dazzling blonde hair fastened high up on her head, the shop manager had a strange air about her that made her seem like she could be in her tens, twenties or thirties.

And came a man's scream from the kitchen at the interior of the shop.

"He-head chef————! H-help me……the Moomoo shellfish are getting violent!"

"Agaaain? That's why I told you to be careful when cooking the Moomoo shellfish. If you get stabbed by their poisonous needles, you'll be out for three days, you know?"

She held her head while saying oh boy.

"Ah—ah, it looks like there's just no outstanding talent that can replace Sheltis. Maybe I'll have to settle on that kid as the successor……I'll go to Tenketsu Palace <Sophia> and barter with Meimei a bit."

"H-hurry, hurry! Uwawaa, the poison needles came out!"

"Yeah, yeah. I'm going now so calm down. Well then, customer, please enjoy yourself at your leisure."

Carrying knives in both hand, the head chef disappeared into the shop interior.

Sending her off with a smile——

"But it's really much more than was rumored."

The customer in a black suit pushed down on his brimmed hat and gulped.

"……Can a single person finish this?"

That was an odd patron.

He wore a pitch black suit with golden buttons, pitch black shoes and a pitch black rimmed hat.

Light golden hair and a shapely nose could be seen from under the rimmed hat which was pulled low over his eyes. The eyes couldn't be seen, but it was easy to imagine a beautiful young man's face from the general outline.

"Let's see……"

He scooped up a bit of the pancake with fresh cream on it and took one bite——

"Ah, this is delicious."

His lips loosened slightly and he sighed without thinking.

"It looks like good ingredients were used along with the fresh cream and the pancakes are cooked just right."

One bite, and another bite.

"Ahh, it's delicious. ……How nice. That Sheltis, he worked at such a wonderful shop. Maybe I should try working here too."

Just as he had quietly murmured that.

"Ah—, we found Ignid."

"Yeah, we found Ignid."

The voices that drifted over from somewhere were accompanied by a slight laugh.

"Oh dear, I've been found."

Different from an auditory hallucination and the howl of the winds, the resonating sound like that of an instrument was a person's voice.

Innocent and pure, mixed with childishness —— the voice of children.

"You'll be scolded if you skip out on work."

"Yeah, you'll be scolded."

The telepathy that wouldn't reach anyone on the main street.

Only one person, the man named Ignid, raised his lips with a chuckle.

"My job is done. But even so, I'm just doing a little reconnaissance."

"Golden <Maha> is waiting for you."

"Yeah, Golden <Maha> is waiting."

The two telepathic voices laughed.

“Golden <Maha> is really strict about being punctual so if you don’t hurry, you’ll be scolded.“

“Yeah, Golden <Maha> is really strict about being punctual.“

“Yes, yes, I’m going. It was the Governmental Sector’s……fourth sector that we were gathering at, right?”

“It’s behind the third sector’s aircraft hangar.“

“Yeah, behind the third sector’s aircraft hangar.“

“……Fuu, it can’t be helped. I wanted to eat a little more though.”

Just leaking a sigh was bewitching.

The parfait was left upon the table. Gazing reluctantly at it with its wafting sweet scent, he stood from his seat after having made his resolve.

What was ahead of Ignid’s vision was a gigantic tower visible even from the second Living District.

Tenketsu Palace <Sophia> —— the white-walled tower that extended into the blue sky.

“Well then, Sheltis, I’ll go on ahead and wait for you at the Governmental Sector.”

While pushing down his black hat that covered his eyes, he made a single bow——

And without anyone’s notice, that existence disappeared.

Chapter 3 – Illusionary Paradise - Heavenly Melody –

Part 1

“……I see, a man like you might also be necessary for the tower.“

Instructor Yumelda in regular clothes whom he’d come across by coincidence at a corner of the Living Districts. That was the beginning of his entrance into Tenketsu Palace <Sophia> and him becoming a Cadet Guard.

Early in the morning, Vaiel walked far away from the training grounds.

“Ah—, damn it, why did it become like this.”

It was Kagura, if he recalled correctly. The perpetrator responsible for disturbing people’s afternoon naps and even using coercion that was half a threat to rope him into a unit.

“What is with ‘It’s a unit battle so please protect me’? ……You can’t rely on somebody like me. Thinking somebody will help you when you’re in trouble is just you seeing a pipe dream.” [T/N: As with the last time, "大将" (general) and "わたし" (me) are interchangeable here as the former is the kanji with the latter being the furigana (reading) provided.]

Sticking his hands in his pockets and curling his back, he loosed criticisms as they came to mind. He knew there was no point in letting them out. Half of it was just something he liked saying.

"……Pointless, so pointless."

Clicking his tongue slightly, Vaiel hurried to his afternoon nap spot.

——Guess I'll go back to sleep until the unit battle.

The bench on the outskirts of the training grounds was for that purpose. It was part of the training grounds but was so far back that the instructors didn't patrol there. Thanks to that, it was his favorite comfortable spot.

Continuing down the small path in the lawn, he finally saw the large tree that marked the location.

It was as unpopular and deserted a space as ever. The bench underneath the tree as well, although finally in use, only had one person sitting on it……

"Ahh? What's this?"

Seeing something uncommon, he stopped without thinking and rubbed his eyes.

The bench that was usually deserted. Somebody's head was bobbing in and out of view behind it.

The small head's black hair was tied into two in the back. The head was just barely visible, so judging from the sitting height, it was likely not an adult.

"Hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, spare me the jokes……a kid?"

He sighed while staring up at the sky. The girl called Kagura or something had also been there a few days ago, but it seemed like he was fated to have kids attached to him.

"Sheesh, just who is this. This kid that's occupying my designated seat so early in the morning."

These were the training grounds so it was probably a Guard. There was no way a Regular Guard or Instructor would be resting in such a deserted place so it was most likely a young Cadet Guard who had run away from training.

"Sheesh, that's my spot."

Scratching the back of his head with his right hand, he walked up with his left hand still stuck in his pocket.

Ten metres to the bench……five metres……three metres, and then.

"Hey, you. Person I don't know."

Coming around to the front, he looked at the one occupying the seat.

"This has been my seat for a hundred million years. If you don't want your front teeth shattered, move now. Got it? If you do, then get……"

Moving right now. Vaiel wasn't able to say those last few words that came to mind.

The one sitting on the bench wasn't a guard,

“? Yuto doesn’t really know what you mean?”

Tilting her head, the young girl looked at him with her clear black eyes.

Her jet black hair was fastened into two locks behind her head. She was wearing a lovely white one-piece dress. A sky blue muffler was wrapped around her neck in a flowing fashion. No matter how you looked at her, she was a civilian.

“……This is my unlucky day.”

“Unlucky day?” [T/N: Vaiel says "厄日" with the kanji, while Yuto says "やくび" (yakubi), showing she has no idea what he's talking about.]

The young girl looked up at him with adorable movements.

Ignoring that, Vaiel put a hand on the bench’s backboard while pressing a hand to his head.

……I’m getting a headache. That Kagura or whatever girl was also like this, but why have I been running into these kinds of brats over the last few days.”

“Or rather, what the heck are you doing here?”

“Is it not okay for Yuto to be here?”

“That’s not the point. This is a training ground, so some civilian brat like you shouldn’t be able to get in.”

“? But Yuto is here?”

“……Damn it all. Okay then, I’ll change the question so even a brat can understand.”

Spurred by how annoying it was and sleepiness, with an expression that was practically glaring, Vaiel moved his face closer. It was a face that would scare kids and make them cry. ……Or it should have.

“Ahaha, onii-chan, your face is scary.”

“Hah? I’m sleepy so it can’t be helped!”

“Yuto’s full of energy, you know—? I slept enough!”

Somehow he had made her happy.

“……Damn it, whatever. How did you get in here?”

Saying that, the girl called Yuto looked up at the sky in thought.

“Yuto’s searching for Eyri-nee.”

“Eyri-nee? Who’s that?”

“Eyri-nee is Eyri-nee? Yuto is always with Eyri-nee.”

"……I see, so that person's your guardian."

He'd come to understand the basic situation.

There were a lot of civilians that came to sightsee at Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>. ……But there were those few. Kids who ran off the instant their parents took their eyes off them for a moment and became lost. This young girl was probably one of them.

"Sheesh, if you're going to act as a guardian, then take proper care of your nuisances."

He sighed as he looked at the young girl called Yuto occupying the center of the bench.

"……You won't listen even if I say to move, huh."

"? Okay. Let's do a half-and-half!"

With a smile, she happily moved to one end of the bench while swinging her legs noisily.

"Hoh. You actually do get it. That's well-done for a brat."

Sitting down on the empty spot, he leaned back on the bench.

……It was annoying that he couldn't sleep lying down though.

He couldn't ask for that luxury in this case. At any rate, the first one to occupy the bench had been the young girl and that young girl had explicitly freed up half for him.

Crossing his arms and legs, he closed his eyes——

……I can……not sleep like this.

Normally, he'd drop right into a dream immediately but it wouldn't go so easily this time.

There was no need to say that the cause was the young girl beside him. While swinging her legs noisily, she kept stealing glances at him. It couldn't be helped that he was conscious of that gaze from a while ago.

"Hey."

"What is it?"

"You, how long have you been doing that?"

"Mm. I don't know. But since yesterday……I wonder where Eyri-nee went."

The young girl's shoulders drooped with sadness. She looked like she would smile not too long ago and now she looked like she was about to cry. It would've been best not to ask. Even with that thought, it was already in the past.

"Hey, since yesterday means……you've been here the entire night?"

"……Yuto doesn't know how to go back home when it gets dark."

There were few people who passed by here and no lighting that actually seemed like lighting. So she had been crouching here at this bench the entire night ——— was that it?

“Hey, hey, do you know Eyri-nee?” [T/N: That's "ねえねえ" (neenee). I can't think of any cute ways for a kid to get attention in English.]

She tugged on the left sleeve of his formal attire.

“Haa? There’s no way I’d know her.”

“……Sorry.”

The young girl cast her head down in loneliness and sadness. Being looked at with sidelong expectant glances, Vaiel turned away without thinking.

……

……Damn it. Why are the Guards always like this.

Those Guards that shoulder the great duty of protecting the Priestesses from the Yuugenshu can’t even realize that there’s a troubled young girl this close to them.

……It’s always like that. The Guards around him were only creating strong units for the sake of promotion.

Nobody realized that this young girl was at a loss. Those who swore to protect the Priestesses were always staring up at the tower, forgetting to extend a hand to the people right before them.

“……That’s wrong, all wrong.”

Rather than becoming a hero as a Guard, a regular person was still a ‘person’.

Was that not the backbone of being a Guard?

“Nobody understands.”

He bit back the bitterness within his mouth.

“Hey, do you know Eyri-nee?”

“Ahhhhhhh, you’re noisy! Don’t look at me with those eyes!”

The sudden loud voice surprised Yuto and her shoulders drew back. Taking a glance at the young girl, Vaiel sighed deeply and stood up.

“Come on, you stand up too.”

“Fue?”

“I’ll take you to the first floor’s lobby. They’ll understand if you make a tower-wide announcement.”

“I’ll find Eyri-nee?”

A complete turnabout from the sullen expression just before, the young girl’s eyes were sparkling.

“At any rate, let’s go.”

“Yeah!”

Nodding, she held out her right hand with a smile.

……Hey.

……Don’t tell me, she wants to hold my hand?

“Damn it, nobody’s looking, right.”

Just in case, he looked around and finally grabbed that hand ——— the second he did grab it, the young girl’s body lifted gently into the air.

“Waa, wawawaa!”

The young girl clung to his leg. It seemed that their heights were too different so holding hands would mean Yuto couldn’t reach the ground.

“Ah—, guess this is the consolation prize.”

This was convenient for him. But it seemed like she didn’t share the same opinion. She folded her arms in thought and then her face lit up.

“Piggyback!”

“Hah?”

“Piggyback! Yuto wants a piggyback!”

“……Hey, hey, hey, don’t get all worked up, brat. What kind of joke are you trying to pull on this Vaiel-sama.”

“Vaa-nii? Vaa-nii?”

“Don’t just shorten people’s names like that; listen up, in the world, naive thinking like yours——”

“……I can’t get a piggyback?……okay. Yuto will walk.”

The young girl trudged on ahead.

That back let off a feeling of loneliness even without words.

“……Damn it, hey, wait a second!”

Grabbing her under both arms, he lifted her above his head like that in one motion.

“Waa, wawawa!”

Yuto flapped her arms as if trying to swim in the air. Ignoring her struggling in surprise, Vaiel placed her on his shoulders, completing the piggyback.

“There, now you have no complaints.”

“Waa! Thanks, Vaa-nii!”

“……I told you not to shorten people’s names so relaxedly.”

“Vaa-nii! Vaa-nii! Amazing—, it’s higher than Shel-nii!”

“…….Whatever already. Do as you like.”

Sighing for the umpteenth time in response to the high-spirited young girl on his shoulders, Vaiel walked towards the tower.

Part 2

Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>, 1st floor, the information lobby.

From guides for tourists to interview appointments, to taking care of lost children, dozens of people were usually present to fulfill these. Within the tower especially, it was a gigantic lobby packed with civilians.

“Hey, hey, I asked yesterday as well, but do you have any information?”

“Yuto-san, wasn’t it. Black hair with a white one-piece. Age is……”

The receptionist tapped on the search terminal.

Eyriey gazed at that screen as if to eat into it as she leaned against the window.

——Where did you go, Yuto?

Since noon yesterday, and as late into the night as possible, she had searched the tower to no avail.

Ever since she’d lost sight of her on the upper floors of the tower, a whole day had already passed. During that time, it was hard to imagine that she had wandered around inside the tower without anybody seeing her. She hoped that she was under somebody’s care though.

“It’s a pity, but no information has arrived.”

“I see, ……thanks.”

She closed her eyes while biting on her lower lip.

……Just where did she go this time?

Truthfully, this was not the first time Yuto had gone missing. She would periodically just not be there and no matter how much Sheltis and she searched for her, they wouldn’t find her.

But a few days later, she’d return all of a sudden with an energetic smile.

She wanted to believe that was the case this time as well but she couldn’t discard the possibility that she’d really become lost.

“Sheltis as well……I wonder if he won’t come soon.”

Having decided it would be difficult on her own, she had requested help from him not too long ago. She’d told him they’d meet up at the 1st floor’s information lobby, so he should be coming soon.

“Same as yesterday, if I find something out, I’ll contact Eyriey-san.”

“I’m counting on you. She’s a cute girl so I think you’ll know immediately. She has beautiful black hair that’s tied into two like twintails. Her clothes are also a pretty color so they should be readily recognizable.”

“Ah, it’s Eyri-nee—. Over there, there!”

“Yep, yep. It’s this feeling of ‘Eyri-nee～’ that……that”

She turned around and there was —— the young girl with the features she’d just described to the receptionist, waving at her with a smile that covered her face.

“Yuto!?”

“Eyri-nee! Waa, I’m glad. It’s Eyri-nee! Look, look, Vaa-nii.”

“……Mm, yeah. Here.”

The man that had been piggybacking Yuto until now let her down and and she ran towards Eyriey at full speed. Eyriey firmly hugged back the young girl that jumped at her chest with both arms spread.

“Yuto! I’m glad……where did you go?”

“Ehehe, Yuto doesn’t really know.”

“……Jeez. Though I expected that. Mm? Yuto, what are you holding?”

Yuto was holding something in her tiny hand.

One was candy wrapped in a vinyl bag and the other was a glass rendition of the tower's mascot character 'The Dusk Dragon <Arma>'. Either one was a souvenir sold at the entrance to the tower's 1st floor.

"You know, you know, Vaa-nii bought them for me!"

Yuto pointed at the young man that had been piggybacking Yuto until not too long ago.

"You brought back Yuto? Really—, thanks. I was worried about where she got lost and was just in the middle of searching."

"……She was wandering around the training grounds."

The young man sighed with a tired expression. He was a tall young man with darkened golden hair that was cut short and his face was moderately tidy, but his expression of displeasure made all of it count for nil.

"The training grounds? Ah—, of course I couldn't find her."

"Well……I was searching for Shel-nii."

"For Sheltis? Ah— I see, it would have been nice if you told me."

And she knocked her own forehead against Yuto's.

"Ehehe, sorry, Eyri-nee."

"It's fine if you understand. So, thank you as well. For guiding her, as well as for the candy and souvenir."

"……That brat was whining about being hungry. It was just right for shutting her up."

He scratched the back of his head, or so she thought. Fed up with doing that, he turned his back.

"Ah, wait! I didn't get your name. As thanks——"

"I don't need thanks, and it was nothing so major that I should name myself for it."

Turning his face away, he was about to leave just like that.

"……Vaiel?"

That was when somebody else called the young man's name.

Reddish brown frizzy hair and amiable eyes, a boy who wore an impressive black jacket —— Sheltis stared over in their direction vacantly.

Part 3

……Why was Vaiel with Eyriey and Yuto?

"Umm, say."

He turned his gaze to the smiling young girl.

He didn't know the circumstances, but at any rate, he had found Yuto, right? —— Before Sheltis could voice that Eyriey pointed at the young man beside her.

"And so, a kind person found Yuto."

"……Vaiel did?"

"That's right, he went so far as to piggyback her and guide her. And even more than that, he bought candy for Yuto who was hungry and also a souvenir! Right?"

"……I didn't do anything major."

He turned his back towards them and headed towards the exit with quick steps as if running.

"Ah, wa-wait, Vaiel?"

Despite calling out to that back, there was no reply.

In contrast with he who had melded into the crowd of tourists and disappeared, they were left isolated in the lobby.

"Eyriey……I'm checking once again but Vaiel brought Yuto over?"

"That's right. Wha—t, he's an acquaintance of yours?"

"Well, if I had to say it, he is. It's a complicated relationship."

Perplexed, he was unable to answer, and Yuto poked his leg.

"Shel-nii, you know. Yuto was treated really gently by Vaa-nii!"

Part 4

The path leading to the training grounds.

Running down the winding trail, he finally caught sight of Vaiel's back.

"There he is. H-hey, wait a second. I have something I want to ask."

"Ah? What is it, something where the punchline is that you've become a lost child now?"

His usual displeased face that looked over his shoulder and his voice didn't have their usual force.

"……Are you possibly tired?"

"Taking care of that brat since morning, of course I'd get tired."

……Then he really did look after Yuto.

“Thanks.”

“Ahh!? There’s no reason for you to thank me.”

“The two from just now are acquaintances of mine.”

Vaiel went silent with a scowl. His heart hurt slightly upon seeing that gesture.

——I thought he was just a lazy Cadet that found everything to be bothersome.

Same as the thoughts of those around him, I thought he was a ruffian with looks to fit the part.

But Kagura and Yuto.

……It’s because I think he’s a good person. Is that bad?

Shel-nii, you know. Yuto was treated really gently by Vaa-nii!

……Maybe I’ve overlooked the most important part of him?

“Say, Vaiel, you don’t usually participate in training, right?”

“Participate in training? That kind of thing is up to the person.”

“Not that, I was just wondering what you do when you’re not training.”

“Sleeping at noon.”

“And when you’re not sleeping at noon?”

“……”

Continuing wordlessly along the trail for a while, they stopped at a fork in the road. And then.

“Nobody understands.”

He muttered in an unusually quiet voice.

“Competing senselessly to become a Regular Guard or training more than anyone else to be stronger than everyone. Being enraptured in that all the time makes them miss the important things.”

“……Important things?”

“When you guys are training, who’s gonna look over a brat like just before?”

He stuck a hand in his formal attire’s pocket and continued on in a brusque manner.

“Train and form teams however much you want. But don’t push that stuff on me. If I’m not there, who will inspect the weapons’ storehouse? Who do you think will help a brat like the one just now?”

“That’s……”

No words came out. It’s not that he was overwhelmed, his words just had that much meaning in them.

That meant basically——

While other Guards were training, he was inspecting the weapons’ storehouse?

While other Guards were forming units to get promoted, he was going around by himself and extending a helping hand to those in trouble like Yuto just now?

“You’ve……been doing those every day?”

“There’s nobody else who will do it other than me; that’s all it is.”

Being replied to so bluntly, Sheltis gasped.

……All alone……without anyone knowing, he’s been doing his best.

The usual training and missions which made up unit activities. He wouldn’t participate in the so-called activities of a guard as he let his sweat flow helping others in a place nobody else could see.

Rather than the Priestesses atop the tower, there is also a man that is influenced by ‘something‘ completely different.

……What Instructor Yumelda had spoken about was this.

It was different from himself who was aiming to fulfill the promise with a Priestess. [T/N: The furigana for 巫女 (priestess) is ユミィ (Ymy).]

The feelings of he who earnestly strived for the image of a Guard that he had described —— they had certainly been conveyed.

Their respective goals were different but their fervent resolve……he felt that they resembled each other.

“……Well, I guess I should say sorry. I completely didn’t realize that you were working so hard.”

“Ahhh!? Don’t just flatter people when you feel like it; it feels bad.”

Vaiel threatened him with the usual sour look.

“Nope. I’m not flattering you, I’m serious.”

“So what are you saying?”

Sheltis cut in front of him and,

“I’ll also help next time. Not just in practice……Monica and Kagura will also help of their own accord if they learn what you’re doing.”

“Haa, you’re an idiot. I’ll pass on that even if I die.”

“Why?”

“You just don’t get it.”

And Vaiel turned his face to the day after tomorrow. [T/N: It's literally 明後日 which is "the day after tomorrow" (two days later). I could replace it with "future" though.]

“You’re not a man if you get women involved in troublesome things. That’s why I said I’ll do it alone.”

Part 5

“Sheltis, ……and Vaiel. Isn’t this rare seeing you two together?”

Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>, public road.

Monica raised her hand at the fork leading to the outdoor training grounds.

“And, well……about yesterday, sorry for showing you an embarrassing side of myself.”

He looked at her for a little while after she finished saying that to start with——

“The thing about ‘Monica-senpai’?”

“Yeah……I didn’t think I’d meet her at a place like that.”

She nodded with her head downcast.

——I knew Monica would also be concerned about it.

It was only yesterday that she had been pressured by Ymy and ran away without saying anything but jumbled words.

He’d heard from Ymy that she was her senpai during her time as an apprentice Priestess but Sheltis was interested in what the key person, Monica, thought.

“Running out so suddenly like that, Ymy……did I offend the Priestess-sama?” [T/N: It sounds so damn weird with "-sama" attached, but 巫女 doesn't usually get it tacked on in the novel. It also indicates that she's separating their positions (and thus being kinda distant).]

“Nope, on the contrary, it looked like she wanted to talk with you more.”

“……I see.”

Monica’s expression gradually shifted to a lonely smile.

“Monica doesn’t dislike that Priestess-sama either, right?”

“Of course. She’s an important Priestess-sama, ……and my former kouhai.” [T/N: Kouhai is the opposite of senpai. It's just somebody that's newer, lower-ranked, or otherwise somehow below the senpai.]

Little by little, with a tone that seemed like she was grasping the core of her memories, she recounted it for him.

“Three years ago when I quit as an apprentice Priestess, I didn’t tell her that I became a Cadet Guard. ……Somehow I had a feeling like I had betrayed her when we’d worked so hard together for so long……and it became hard to say. I wanted to inform her when I became at least a Regular Guard.”

“And like that, time passed by.”

“It’s a shameful story. ……My former kouhai is now a marvelous Priestess-sama.”

The fear within those grey eyes was clear. Envy from being surpassed by a kouhai —— rather than that, Monica looked off somewhere far into the distance with a deeply complex gaze.

……I’m glad. She doesn’t hate Ymy.

“It would be great if you could talk even a little on the trip to the Governmental Sector.”

“Yeah. For that reason, we must win the final selection.”

She balled both of her hands into fists.

She stared straight at the location enclosed by wire mesh ——— the door that led to the outdoor training grounds.

“Good morning.”

From beside the door, Kagura greeted them, accompanied by her floating machine pearl <Machina>.

“Good morning. You’re here early, Kagura.”

“You’re just barely on time. Look, it’s really soon.”

Holding the machine pearl <Machina>, she turned around and what she pointed to was——

The figures of five people approaching from the direction of the training grounds. The female instructor and behind her were four Cadet Guards.

“Fumu, Monica’s unit is here as well. Then as planned, we’ll go over the details of the final selection and do the introduction of the examiner —— and finally, we’ll do the member introductions as well.”

The instructor pointed the cigarette she was holding in her mouth at them.

Facing them at the head of his unit was a black-haired, young, male Cadet Guard.

His age could be around twenty. His was tall and lean, with a nice face of delicate features. Upon that was an ever-present benevolent smile. But his scornful and hostile eyes seemed like they would swallow someone up.

“Heeh? Are introductions necessary?” [T/N: へえ. It's like lengthening "heh" except that the equivalent in English would be closer to "ohh". The Japanese use おお and such for surprise (or sarcastic surprise), etc., so I like to actually keep this for distinction.]

With that haughty attitude, he laughed exaggeratedly in a surprised manner.

“Introductions or whatever, shouldn’t each side have already investigated the other team?”

“I’ve decided it’s necessary.”

“……Well, if the instructor says so.”

With one hand in the pocket of his formal wear, he looked over with a condescending gaze.

“I’m Nash. Nash G. Endolfin. It’s a pleasure. Do the other three also have to introduce themselves? Starting from the left, the one with the great sword is Kimberly, the heavy spear knight at the center is Lasdax and the shinryoku practitioner is the sole female of the group, Myun-fa.” [T/N: Names. Names. NAMES? Here we go. The leader is ナッシュ•G•エンドルフィン (nasshu G endorufin). Now the lackeys. First one is キンベリー (kinberi-). Second is ラスダックス (rasudakkusu). Third is ミュンファ (myunfa). Help?]

Nash shrugged his shoulders in an exaggerated motion.

“And you?”

“……I am”

“Though there’s no need to ask.”

Kukuu, came a slightly suppressed laugh.

“You’re the unit leader, Monica, right? That girl is Kagura, and he’s Sheltis. Behind that is Vaiel. The results of the first selection were publicly announced but being hit twice is an admirable number. You also wiped out your opponent in the second selection safely. The first battle was six minutes, fifteen seconds. The second was……what was it, Myun-fa?”

“Ten minutes, seven seconds.”

“That’s it. Those are also impressive numbers. Even though I thought you were just a mish-mash team to begin with. Passing the first selection and winning even the unit battle, and you even crushed Shandy’s team yesterday. Ah, Shandy’s the opponent you fought with in the unit battles yesterday. If it went as expected, I thought we’d be battling them in the final selection.”

……They’d done some detailed research.

[Image]

Without it showing up on his face, Sheltis was applauding them in his heart.

Their speech was superficial and arrogant. But opposite that, one could see that they were a team that was serious, meticulous and didn’t slack on gathering information about their opponent’s unit.

“Nash, are you done talking?”

The instructor’s expression remained unchanged.

“The participants in the final screening are these two units. That’s all. After this is the explanation from the examiner.”

The instructor waved her suit and a single Regular Guard came in to replace her.

Her dazzling blonde hair was tied into two locks behind her head. The girl with two reddish brown eyes adorning her lovely face was wearing the normal formal clothes, but the lower half was a skirt.

"……I'sa?"

Seeing the figure he recognized, Sheltis reflexively called that name.

"Good day, Cadet Guards, I am this time's examiner, I'sa."

But she only cast a glance in his direction and continued on as if she didn't know him.

"It's eight people as planned. Well, it would be out of the question to be late here."

She said that with a glance and deeply meaningful smile.

"Well then, let's get to the details of the final selection —— the final selection isn't like the tests of battle strength until just now, it will measure the strength of your coordination as a unit. The theme will be patrolling of the nature district mission. I'll be going along with you to check you all out in detail."

……So it's a patrol mission as I thought.

The last selection being a test of coordinated strength was a standard of sorts. Even within the types available, a Regular Guard would go out on a patrol mission periodically so it was easy to make it into a test for measuring the aptitude of Cadet Guards.

"The duration is three days. After completing your preparations, assemble at noon. The finer instructions will be passed on aboard the transport. Any questions?"

Out of the eight people there, no hands were raised. Having decided there were no questions, I'sa narrowed her eyes slightly.

"If there are no questions, then I'll just give you one warning. ……Unit leader, Nash G. Endolfin. That haughty attitude is not befitting of a Cadet Guard. I advise you to rework it."

"Oh my, and here I had the intention of listening seriously."

The young male unit leader shrugged his shoulders with a scoffing expression.

"Even though while I was explaining, you had your eyes closed and were frivolously smiling? Then I'd like you to understand your position better."

"Position……position, is it."

Being glared at by a Regular Guard who was his superior, Nash's slight smile still didn't vanish.

"That's about you, isn't it. The failure of a younger sister whose older sister is much too exemplary, right?"

"It has nothing to do with onee-sama. I am the examiner here and I have no intention of borrowing from my sister's prestige. I'll continue the test fairly and impartially."

“Then that’s fine. Well then, there are preparations to be made for tomorrow, so we’ll excuse ourselves here.”

Nash’s group made their exit from the gathering of guards. After confirming he couldn’t see his back, Sheltis made eye contact with I’sa who was still there.

“Is now okay?”

“For what, I wonder?”

“Umm……see, ……various things.”

About the wound she sustained from the battle with Maha. About her partner, the dual gun wielding Jin. About her position as the examiner this time. There were too many things he wanted to ask about so he didn’t know which to begin from.

“Fool, get things straight in your head before you start speaking.”

I’sa sighed after folding her arms. It was not the attitude she took on as an examiner but the confident and high-handed one that Sheltis knew.

“Umm……well then, starting from that one case.”

“The Maha case? I was only injured slightly to begin with and Jin’s recovery is going well. If it’s about how I’m the examiner this time, I made the request myself. Jin’s in rehabilitation at any rate.”

“Heeh, that’s rare. You yourself said that you wanted to be the examiner?”

Even though the job of an examiner required time and effort.

“Well, the Cadet Guards that pass this exam are the ones that will be traveling together with onee-sama to the Governmental Sector, right? I don’t want to let some unknown person travel together with onee-sama, so I thought I should choose who it would be myself.”

“Your onee-sama will be traveling together……traveling together?”

He repeated I’sa’s words several times with a cocked head. The ones going on the trip to the Governmental Sector were Ymy, the clerk of the General Affairs Bureau and the Cadres Guard. That would mean that I’sa’s onee-san would be one of those people.

Then who would it be……

“Heeh. I’sa’s onee-san is a clerk in the tower?”

“What kind of stupid things are you saying. She’s the Cadres Guard, the Cadres Guard. The Guard closest to the Sennenshi.”

Suddenly, Leon’s warning came back to him.

“Be careful. They’re someone who’ll figure out your true identity if you act carelessly.“

“You also know the person who’s at the summit of the elite guards right now. You’ll understand if I say it’s ‘Jelshuvessa’ whom you’ve competed with countless times.“

“No way!?”

“What’s not possible?”

“No, well……you can’t possibly be that Ishtar‘s……little sister?”

“Oh, so you know. Well, onee-sama is famous so that much is assured.”

I’sa puffed her chest with satisfaction.

“……I’ve somehow come to an understanding.”

There were many females Guards but there were only a handful amongst the Elite Guards which were in the upper echelons. However, within that handful, there were periodically female Guards that were hiding power enough to crush a male Elite Guard.

——The one at the top of all that was Ishtar Is Ismael. [T/N: イシュタル•イス•イスマエル (ishutaru isu isumaeru). Yeah.]

I’sa had also affirmed her with the lofty title of “onee-sama”. That was just how powerful her older sister was, standing far above even amongst the Guards.”

“Well, let’s put that aside. I’m glad, with I’sa as the examiner, I can be at ease. If it was a Regular Guard I didn’t know watching, I’d feel awkward.”

“……As naive as always. But it was true that I will be judging fairly.”

I’sa thrust her extended finger out at him.

“It’s a test to travel together with onee-sama. I have no intention of favoring you just because I know you. I will be evaluating you Cadet Guards as the examiner. Remember that.”

He stared down that finger and look straight on. Exchanging glances with Monica and Kagura, Sheltis was representing the unit in their stead.

“I know, we also have the intention of doing our best fair and square.”

“Fun, then that’s fine. Try your best.”

I’sa snorted and turned around. She then headed off.

“And with that, the gathering has come to an end. I’m heading back first.”

“H-hey, wait, Vaiel. We’re going to discuss the strategy going into the final selection now.”

Monica held back Vaiel who was about to leave.

“I’m sleepy. I’ll just listen to the results of the meeting afterwards.”

“That’s kind of selfish——”

Just before Monica raised her voice, Sheltis cut in between them.

“Wa……wait, wait, Monica! Sorry, just forgive him today!”

“Eh?”

She blinked with a puzzled and lovely dumbfounded expression.

“I’ll pass on the details of the meeting to Vaiel later. Okay?”

“……If Sheltis is going to go that far, fine.”

Monica assented with an unsatisfied look.

“But what happened? If there’s a reason, I’d like to know.”

“Eh……well, if you insist and Vaiel runs away here, it’d also be a problem.”

Without mentioning the thing about Yuto in the early morning, he pulled through with a deceptive smile.

……Absolutely do not talk about it, huh.

……Even though he’s doing such great things all alone, he won’t tell anyone.

Part 6

Dead silence.

An almost painful silence and a chill that seemed to even freeze the air currents.

The holy room in the tower which bound heaven —— floor 281, the Cathedral.

The room’s ritual equipment shone with a brass color and stars and the moon adorned the stained glass. The ceiling’s deep blue mural mimicked the azure sky.

“……”

Ymy stood there completely alone with her eyes closed.

Immersing herself in the silence, she felt the passage of time with her entire body as she faced the heavens.

[Unto me, all the wishes that of which I am able.....]

[ele So Phi-a-s Arma-Riris]

Her lips chanted the release preface that indicated the activation of power. In an instant, overflowing crimson particles shrouded Ymy’s body that was clothed in pure whites vestments.

Crimson, that was the shine for Shinryoku of those that were specialized in baptism. [T/N: 洗礼 literally means "baptism". Keep it?]

The power to purify mateki.

“You don’t need complicated prayers for the purification types. The release of shinryoku. That is everything, the pinnacle.“

Those were the words of her senior Priestess, Meimel.

Releasing the shinryoku within herself and purifying mateki. Just that. What determined its effectiveness was neither the shinryoku wavelength nor technique. The reason she who excelled in potential was reputed as the Baptism Priestess even amongst Priestesses was for this reason.

——I thought I would do my best.

Syun-rei was of the territory type and Meimel was proficient in barrier rituals.

——I thought even I had done my best to not bring shame to the name of the Baptism Priestess.

——But only the mateki residing within Sheltis is……

The mateki that had taken root within the body of her childhood friend was the only one she couldn’t do anything about.

Elbert Resonance —— a phenomenon where sufficiently strong mateki and shinryoku of roughly the same strength would repel each other and, distorting the laws of physics, would give off powerful light and flames.

“Ymy, awaken the possibility that is only available to you.” [T/N: I think it's worth mentioning that she uses the word 開花 (kaika) which means to "bloom (a flower)".]

There is a method to overcome Elbert Resonance. And it’s closely related to the “form” of my shinryoku. Queen Salah taught me that.

……But what is it.

……I wonder why there’s a connection between the “form” of my shinryoku and Elbert Resonance. Syun-rei taught me that my “shape” is a “flower bud”.

The crimson amaryllis flower, she said.

……Hmm, but speaking of crimson.

“The same color as the light of baptism……? Is that just a coincidence……?”

The color of shinryoku that indicated baptism and the color of her “form” was the same.

Crimson, it might become a clue.

“……”

It was no good, thinking about things with a possible relation, nothing was coming to mind. Even if she turned everything she had learned as an apprentice Priestess upside-down, the word “amaryllis” had never come out in her studies of shinryoku.

“Really? You really don’t remember anything?”

A voice she didn’t recognize suddenly came from right behind her.

“Wh-who!?”

She turned around as if having been repelled——

Over there was a gigantic dark purple brilliance that filled her vision. Wrapped in a dark purple mist, it was a strange beast whose crimson eyes were shining.

“Yuugenshu!? N-no way……how is it in this sanctuary?”

Yuugenshu had infiltrated this Cathedral once one month ago during the great infiltration where the Yuugenshu had penetrated Hyouketsu Kyoukai. ……It couldn’t be that it had hidden here at that time?

“Kuu!”

There was no leeway to think about why the Yuugenshu was here. At any rate, activate a spell to protect herself——

■ ■, …… ■, ■ ■ ■, ■ …… ■ …… ■ ■ ■■■, ■, ■ …… ■

Oe/ Dia = U hiz gazzinis sis wei sighn. Quo zess wiz xes kyele.

The smoke covering the Yuugenshu’s body gave off an amethyst-like glow. The glow gave off became light and the light formed bands of light that were thinner than hair.

The activation of mateki.

——Not good……the spell won’t make it in time!?

The light spread out in concentric circles with the beast at the center and the floor that came into contact with the light was progressively decaying —— without completing a defense spell or baptism spell for attack, Ymy was swallowed up by the mateki’s light.

She resolved herself for death.

……

……Huh?

There was no pain. From her experiences with being bathed in mateki, there were a dreadful nausea and pain inflicted. But there was none of that just now. ……Why?

She timidly opened her eyes.

Before her was the glow of the Cathedral that hadn't changed until just a little while ago. The floor and walls that should have been invaded by the mateki and decayed hadn't changed a bit and the ceiling's ornament was also being bathed in light.

More than that, the figure of the Yuugenshu was nowhere to be seen. Exactly where did——

"Did the illusion just now appear real?"

"!"

She now turned to the voice that came from directly to her side.

"……Who are you?"

Shiny deep black —— a girl with jet black long hair was there.

She wore form-fitting black vestments with a silver jacket. Her age appeared to be twenty three or twenty four. She didn't seem much older but that profound smile on her face……it was like sharp and beautiful like a drawn blade that had been completed over a great deal of time. [T/N: It says jacket in katakana. The picture near the front makes it look more like a muffler or manteau. Apparently everything that goes over your shirt is a jacket to the author.]

"Me? I am——"

She combed her ruffling hair with her hand and turned her amber eyes towards Ymy.

Even now, her voluptuous twin mounds that seemed like they would spill out, tightly bound waist, and expanding out once again, her waist, formed a bewitching figure which was visible even with her vestments. Her devilish silhouette was to the point where she, who was of the same sex, also gasped. [T/N: Silhouette given in katakana. Kanji are 体型美. Body, form and beauty.]

"Tsali, that is my name. I also do not mind 'Master of Heaven'." [T/N: She says 主天. First is "master" or "lord". Second is "heaven" or "sky".]

Chuckle, chuckle. Her lips that wore black lipstick were laughing a little.

……Tsali?

It was a name she'd never heard before. No, to begin with, was she really someone from Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>? She was wearing something that resembled the tower's vestments but Ymy had never seen vestments with such a personalized design like that.

"The Yuugenshu just now was an illusion, is what you said, right?"

"An illusion of paradise. Everything is a portion of the [Forbidden Crystal]'s memories and I merely gave it form."

Her heart thumped strongly for an instant.

……Wh-what? What was that feeling?

An illusion of paradise, as well as that Forbidden Crystal. ……I don't really get it. But the instant I heard those two terms, something suddenly grew restless within me.

“J-just now……you did something, didn’t you!”

Pressing down on her pulsating chest, Ymy glared at her, but she just laughed while feigning ignorance.

“Nope, I’ve done nothing. I’ve simply hummed the key to this world. You just reacted to it on your own ——— your shinryoku resonated with those names.”

Holding out her left fist, Tsali turned to the ceiling and opened her palm.

A lovely glass ware fell down. Carved from the dark purple crystal was a small winged dragon. She recognized it; it was the souvenir sold at Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>’s lobby.

It was the tower’s mascot, [Dusk Dragon <Ama>]. Why did she bring out that kind of silly thing?

“This is really interesting. While I wasn’t looking, they sold this kind of thing at the tower.”

The small glass dragon sat upon the palm of her hand. It was nothing but a souvenir that anybody could get but she was gazing at it lovingly with half-closed eyes.

“Is there……somebody about that?”

“I bought it. Together with a bag full of candy.”

“Eh?”

“Well, that’s fine. What I was saying was interesting was how this dragon became Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>’s mascot, even though nobody remembers its origin ——— is what it means, Priestess-sama. Rather, Ymy. Ymy Ele Soufflenictole.”

“……What do you mean?”

“I mean that you’re the only one who hasn’t changed a bit from three years ago.”

“!”

Her chest experienced a squeezing pain. Different from the heartbeat just now, it was like the sharp pain from having a blade thrust in there. She clenched her fists but that wasn’t enough so she bit together her molars.

“……I am……truly not up to par but”

“You’re doing your utmost as a Priestess? Doing your best has caused growth? That’s also an illusion; the training your devote your body to is a meaningless virtual image. It’s a virtual image that has no reflection in a mirror.”

“Th……that’s not true!”

But Tsali seemed to have been waiting for those words as her smile grew wider and,

“Have you noticed that the world around you is undergoing a rapid change?”

“……Eh?”

“The boy that fell to the Garden of Corrupted Song <Eden> has returned to the floating continent. Hyouketsu Kyoukai was penetrated, even if only for a moment, resulting in a large-scale invasion. Also, the cultivation tank found at the floating archipelago <Lagoon>. These have all occurred within roughly the same time frame. What if they’re all connected?”

……I really wonder who she is.

Incidents that should only by privy to the Priestesses of the tower were known to her to this extent.

“The world is in flux. Even though you are at the center of that vortex, you haven’t realized it. That’s why I’m here. ……That’s right, it’s a good occasion for the frozen time to begin moving.”

Tsali slowly opened her right fist.

“Change. The stimulus for your shinryoku to bloom will definitely not be strong enough. That’s why I shall impart it to you. In place of that restless Queen, I will teach you the melody you do not know.”

What was laying within her hand was a scarlet crystal fashioned to look like a flower petal.

—— [Keinez <Red Song>] ——

She hummed something.

In that instant, light was created. The scarlet crystal shattered into pieces and melded into the air, then each fragment spurned out torrents of richly colored light.

The lights illuminating the Cathedral converged and drew a single figure.

……Wha……what is this.

Before her eyes, the lights had converged to form a door.

“The beginning is a thousand years ago at the illusionary paradise. Now, Ymy Ele Soufflenictole —— when you have seen the world as it was before Hyouketsu Kyoukai was erected, what will be your impressions?” [T/N: This was translated wrong in the preview. I do better with context ><.]

From the door of light came forth strong luminance akin to dawn——

Then Ymy lost consciousness.

楽園幻想

Armariris Elma

En Se et rein cornis c

hedlws, Uhw kis tinny lef hypne tes me

elenis kamyu, nefit Uhz yulis —

elmei nett, yehle valen steras tury Kyel-fe

de clue nett, shela elmei-l-pheno dio Kyel-f

meh mutis evhe, Ahw edel noi Egunl lin

Sera clar yehle R

Sera, van bie clar d-l-ele pha Sec lit

Ao/ De Orbie Clar, nemne Ses colin hypn

steris pheno yum yulis fel Sec nuel, enc

vequs noi shadilis kaon lef solitis x

clar ria Eeo, nefit elmei pheno delis Se

was Kiris reh jas, van Ec yuma iflis…

Elma sia Risis ele Selahphenori

Miqu, clue-l-solitis mis cela

sophia, leide-lis, clue-l-sophie neckt rei

Kyel-fes Sophit ele vel xeph…

The sky was burning bright red.

Part 7

"……Where……is this?"

Pressing down on her dizzy head, Ymy shakily got to her feet.

She had fallen onto a field she had never seen before……looking around, she could see water fountains and a benches, and numerous slides were erected over sand hills.

"A nature park?"

Tall trees had been planted that encircled the park and were probably a replacement for a barricade. Even deeper than that, about a hundred metres ahead of where she stood were a line of large structures.

If it was a park within the city, then there were numerous ones around Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>. ……There were, but she had never seen this one. And what she was curious about was,

"……The sky is kind of scary."

Looking up at the sky, she unconsciously grimaced. The clouds were large and black, with the sky a blood-like red. It was like the end of this world —— the sky carried that kind of atmosphere.

……Where is this?

She had been talking with the woman called Tsali and then the world a thousand years ago……she had said she would show her the world before Hyouketsu Kyoukai had been erected. When she came to, she had fallen here.

A dream? A hallucination? No, that wasn't it. The solidity of the ground, the smell of the air, the feel of the clouds. It was unthinkable for them to be a hallucination. It was unmistakably the real world. But no matter what power was used, this kind of——

"……No."

Thinking about that would come later. She had to search for a way to return from here for now.

.

"Emergency notice, emergency notice."

.

At the same time she put out one foot, a warning suddenly came.

"Wh-what?……What's happening?"

.

"Yuugenshu battalion approaching from the northern skies.

Those living in the Living Sector, please evacuate to the shelters.“

.

……Yuugenshu, it can’t be!

.

An instinctual commotion pressured her chest. Reflexively, Ymy looked up at the sky.

The bright red sky and the sparse black clouds. One portion of those clouds was being torn to pieces unnaturally……it was strange. In these windless conditions, there was no way a cloud would move like that.

.

“I repeat, a Yuugenshu battalion is approaching.

Those living in the Living Sector, please evacuate to the shelters.“

.

The change was sudden. The second she thought the torn black clouds had ceased moving ——— it fell in a straight line to the ground.

As I thought!

That was not a cloud mist, and that thing which was shrouded in a dark purple mist was.

“……A Yuugenshu!?”

The attacker from the skies fell to the park’s field.

Juu……uu……uuuuuu……

The corruption of mateki. The ground where the Yuugenshu landed boiled and decayed.

“……That time’s commander!”

Biting her lips together and waving her vestments, she glared at the Yuugenshu that had descended.

A pair of wings and four massive limbs as well as the lizard head which protruded out of the dark purple mist.

She recalled that appearance that resembled a dragon’s. There was no way she could forget. It was the Yuugenshu commander of the great invasion.

.

■ ■, …… ■, ■ ■ ■, ■ …… ■ …… ■ ■ ■, ■, ■ …… ■

Oe/ Dia = U hiz gazzinis sis wei sighn. Quo zess wiz xes kyele.

.

Out from the Yuugenshu's mouth came a curse-like sound.

Dark purple light swirled like a vortex and gathered towards the Yuugenshu, then suddenly expanded several hundred metres.

[Unto me, all the wishes that of which I am able.....]

[ele So Phi-a-s Arma-Riris]

Lifting her spirit, she offered a prayer of baptism that resisted mateki. Following the release chant, scarlet particles wrapped around her——

A chill.

"! Ky, aa!"

Being pushed back by the surge of mateki, she was blown backwards. Blown back around ten metres, she slammed hard into the large trees lining the park.

She'd lost in a simple comparison of strength between shinryoku and mateki? That……shouldn't be……until now, that had never happened once.

"……Ka……aa……?"

She couldn't breathe because of the intense pain on her back.

——This is bad……the next mate……ki……I need to……focus my consciousness.

Calm Mind. [T/N: 心鎮 is literally "heart/mind" and "weight". However, the second kanji is also part of 鎮まる which something goes quiet. It comes together to be like "settling of the heart/mind".]

She forcefully separated her mind from the harsh pain of her body and focused only on the shinryoku spell.

It was a posture with both knees and both hands on the ground. In addition, her face was raised. Her vision was blurry but she still forced them open and glared at the Yuugenshu.

……I……can't, lose.

……I am……a Priestess, ……so there's no way I can lose.

She prepared a spell to defend against the next mateki——

But the [next] didn't come no matter how long she waited.

"Eh?"

Paying no attention to her, the Yuugenshu spread its wings and flew off. ……Why did it leave even though I'm still fine? The Yuugenshu should have known that much as well.

——Tosaa. [T/N: It's a light impact on the ground.]

From directly to her side came a light sound of something falling to the ground. Another Yuugenshu? She spun towards the injured body. Over there was not the comrades of the strange beast.

"……A kid?"

The one who had fallen face up on the field was a single person……a boy of about ten years old. The fiber of his clothes was tattered and his skin that went in and out of view was being corrupted by an ominous dark purple speck.

——It wasn't mateki aimed at me.

She had been surprised leading to her realizing it too late: the Yuugenshu had been aiming at this kid from the start. That's why, having accomplished its goal, it had flown away.

……At any rate, I should purify him.

Changing the target of the spell that had been aimed at the Yuugenshu, she chanted a spell that would bless the target she was in contact with.

.

O seven colors of the interweaving dream

Yu/ ubinis ole = C kis tih Ies.

.

"……You'll be fine."

Holding the fallen boy, she embraced him.

.

The slumbering spring's rest is at an end, wishing, the augite that awakens with the path.

mios huda yum xeph fel hypne shel sephat, xephnis wision.

.

Now in this place, the accumulated songs of praise, the quivering pulsations, arrive at the heavenly sound.

mehnes nelar, Ee toga-s-sia vea clar = C nelves zahl tis kyel Sophit.

.

"I will……heal you."

The touching skin, the body heat she could feel and her own.

The scarlet light that was blessing her was passed through her arms to the boy.

.

The pouring drops, lovingly fill and run towards the fated time.

kei yum lisy r-blow-s-miel xins clue Is-Ye-fio missin.

.

O wishes, become the path of thousands of hopes.

Ris sia sophia, shel evoia steras tis lef ilis.

.

The dark purple light that was eating away at the boy. The scarlet light that was purifying that curse.

The two lights swirled together like a vortex.

.

——For the time the world is filled with prayers, I sing.

Yu/ Se = C clar fears valen r-miel noi I.

.

And then the scarlet light——

The scarlet light was reflected by the dark purple light and unilaterally destroyed.

.

"……Eh?"

Not understanding what had happened, she seriously doubted her eyes.

"……No way……you're kidding, right?……"

My baptism spell had no effect? There's no way it was rejected like with Sheltis. The shinryoku was certainly penetrating the mateki's barrier. But for it to be deflected……

She had seen a phenomenon like this many times.

Those who just became an apprentice Priestess had been repelled just like this when they tried to purify mateki.

The reason was just that their specs were too low. Even if a film were taken in high quality, if the television was of low quality, the picture quality would become low quality —— even if the amount of shinryoku was sufficient, there was no meaning if the spell could not match up with it.

……I made the same mistake as an apprentice Priestess?

It was the same just before. Her defense spell had lost to the mateki. And if she considered the phenomenon with the baptism spell just now, one idea came to mind. It was an idea simpler than anything.

.

The Yuugenshu's mateki is surpassing my shinryoku as a Priestess?

.

Her defense spells were of no help and her baptism spells were being treated completely like a child.

……That, that kind of thing.

……Until now……even though I've done my best in training……while shedding tears……

While holding the child that had lost consciousness, she lost her strength and fell to her knees.

The penetration of the mateki eating away at the boy wasn't stopping. His body turning completely dark purple was proof that his body's cells were in necrosis from the mateki infection. Even so, all she could do was watch.

This is, this is———

.

"When you have seen the world as it was before Hyouketsu Kyoukai was erected, what will be your impressions?"

.

This was the world a thousand years ago.

Before Hyouketsu Kyoukai was erected, it was a matter of course that Yuugenshu as fearsome as this were running rampant.

"……I don't like this."

Biting her lips together enough to spurt blood, she wiped away the tears in her eyes.

……I don't like it.

She definitely did not want to give up.

Because the world was like this, someone was necessary. Because the world was like this, Priestesses were necessary. If the Priestesses gave up, everything would end. ……That's why I won't give up.

She gathered power once again in the hand holding the boy.

She was about to start the baptism chant again but Ymy's mouth froze in an open position.

……Zuu……zuzuu……zunn……n……

A rumble shook the ground and a gigantic [something] roared.

"!"

A slight pain could be felt on her skin as the ground swayed. It wasn't because of the shaking, it was because of the overwhelming pressure given off by that which was closing in. Even though she still couldn't see it.

It's there and —— it's coming!

The moment she felt that, that appeared from the space between the structures in the park.

.

Reaching even the buildings that were about ten floors tall, it was an unheard-of enormous Yuugenshu.

.

Her eyes met with its crimson eyes that were as large as people.

"……Ah……h……"

Her body wouldn't move. The moment their eyes met, she had been went stiff like she'd been paralyzed.

——I can't win.

——I can't……no, humanity cannot win against this monster.

Time did not move until her body, her heart, and her instincts told her such. Even the Yuugenshu just before had a size and pressure that was out of the question. More than anything, the shine of that mateki that covered it was like a solar eclipse that blotted out the sun. It was enough to cover the sky.

……I'm sorry.

……It looks like……I won't be able to help you.

Holding onto the boy whom the mateki was eating away at, she couldn't do anything but look up at the Yuugenshu.

.

■ ■, …… ■, ■ ■ ■, ■ …… ■ …… ■ ■ ■■■, ■, ■ …… ■

Oe/ Dia = U hiz gazzinis sis wei sighn. Quo zess wiz xes kyele.

.

The roar of the Yuugenshu. That mateki shook the sky and released a brilliant and mysterious shine.

The ring of light enveloped Ymy and the boy in the park——

……I'm sorry.

Holding the boy tightly, she shut her eyes. No, the instant she was about to close them, somebody flew out in front of her.

.

Come now, let us offer up all the promised children.

Elma sia Risis ele Selahphenoria

.

The girl whose mysteriously colored hair was flapping in the wind chanted.

Like silk thread of seven colors, the ruffling hair changed its beautiful color.

Crystal colored —— with a transparent silvery white like ice as its base, the parts touched by light shone with a mix of pearl and gold.

Azure light.

The brilliant and gentle shinryoku light activated before the mateki arrived.

A barrier type shinryoku spell?

The mateki's shine that shrouded the world was rejected by the light barrier. That instant.

.

——Dchidchi……dchii!……——

.

Blue-white sparks that made one think of a lightning flash surged from the barrier's border.

"Elbert Resonance!?"

……It's the same as with Sheltis and I.

Even forgetting the situation, her eyes were drawn in by the shining sparks before her eyes.

Elbert Resonance, a miracle phenomenon that only occurred when sufficiently strong mateki and shinryoku collided. That's happening between that unheard-of Yuugenshu and that girl?

The mateki and barrier were mutually annihilated.

The Yuugenshu that understood its attack had been blocked was visibly disturbed. In that momentary instant, the girl once again spun shinryoku release chants.

.

[Unto me, the only wish of which I am capable.....]

[Yu/ ris-ia Sophie, Arma-Selah]

.

It was an azure light barrier that continued out to the horizon.

The light ring bound the Yuugenshu's movements and next a spear of light that shone golden pierced it, fastening it to the ground. Lastly, the azure barrier shifted from that color to scarlet —— it changed to the color of baptism which was most effective of the Yuugenshu.

"……Amazing."

She couldn't say anything other than that.

Azure was the color of barriers. Golden brilliance indicated an advent spell, and last was a large-scale blast of baptism.

A combination spell of three different types of systems. With that much of a range, that powerfully. And it was activated with only one phrase of a release chant.

"That child appears to be contaminated by mateki. Shall I purify him?"

Letting her transparent crystal hair flow, the girl turned back towards her.

She was wearing a modest and plain shirt and skirt. Her shoulders and body were slim to the point that they looked like they'd break, and her height was roughly the same as Syun-rei. She wasn't even in her later tens. As best, she was thirteen or fourteen.

"Ah……ah……umm"

There were two reasons she was mumbling. Her unfulfilled promise with her baptism having no effect. Also —— her gaze was stolen by the girl's gem-like cuteness.

Her moist eyes which were tinged with sorrow were a vivid lapis lazuli color.

Her skin was a transparent white like white porcelain, smooth and slim without a single blemish. Her looks were lovely and ephemeral, her figure enough to allow one to see a fairy.

……Just who is this girl?

"The spell, I'll do it."

Looking over at Ymy who was holding tight the boy, the girl said that in a moderate tone.

"The necrosis has started so he may act up. Hold down that child like that."

"Y-yes!"

The girl kneeled down on the field and sung the same release chant.

[Unto me, the only wish of which I am capable.....]

[Yu/ ris-ia Sophie, Arma-Selah]

This is her release chant?

Is it a coincidence?……it feels like it greatly resembles my release chant. And this voice, it feels like I've heard it somewhere. And not just once or twice, it feels like I've been hearing it all the time as of late.

"It seems fine already."

"Eh, al-already?"

She looked back at the boy. The venomous dark purple speck had disappeared and his skin had returned to its original color. There was a slight spot with necrosis but he would be saved with a surgical procedure.

"You are a kind person, aren't you."

Having that said all of a sudden, Ymy blinked in surprise.

"Eh?"

"This child didn't act up at all to the end. He's calmed down a lot. I think your feelings have definitely been transmitted."

"……Ah, i-is……that so. I was focusing so hard……"

But she was happy. She had almost become depressed by herself who couldn't do anything and she felt that that would be mitigated by a single phrase.

"U-um……what's your name?"

Please let me hear your name. She was about to say that but realizing the presence behind the girl, she felt a chill throughout her whole body. ——This pressure.

The Yuugenshu with the unheard-of gigantic body lifted its body that had been broken down and stood once again. It had become a more brutal wounded beast. The dark purple shine overflowed from its entire body.

"Be-behind you! It's not over"

"——No."

Perceiving the beast with a sidelong glance, the girl told her this quietly.

"It's already over."

.

A light from the heavens cleaved the Yuugenshu into two clean halves.

.

A sound like glass shattering. The Yuugenshu's massive body fragmented into light particles and proceeded to annihilation like the dispersal of the leftover shinryoku.

……What happened?

This girl had done nothing. It shouldn't be that the Yuugenshu had suicided. If so.

.

"Shasa, are you okay?" [T/N: Yes, even the kanji match up.]

.

A silver-haired girl wearing a light-emitting mechanical outfit.

She seemed to be slightly taller than Ymy with about the same age. Her dignified voice and expressionless face that couldn't be read were strangely suited to each other. That kind of girl was standing there.

"Of course. Rather than that, how about that side? Is the evacuation of civilians complete?"

Shasa —— the girl with crystal hair smiled.

"Comparing the digital map with the residents' register, 98% evacuation was confirmed. The remaining civilians have been left up to the guidance members. We'll now be moving from raids to full annihilation."

The silver-haired girl held up her right hand. Unbefitting of a girl in her teens, she was holding a massive great sword that far surpassed her in height.

……Don't tell me the one who cleaved the Yuugenshu in half just now was this girl?

……Furthermore, with that great sword?

"Is a battle status report necessary?"

Shasa nodded and the silver-haired girl continued onto the second part.

"That mid-size Yuugenshu just now was the last one in the city. However, we're picking up readings of 1700 Yuugenshu in the northern airspace. About this, I have judged that I alone am enough to clean them up. The expected time for annihilation is 17,200 seconds later at 4:30 PM."

"You do that and I'll purify the parts of the city that are corrupted."

"Yes. However, due to the distortion in the airspace, large types are expected to appear in eight hours. From the response, there will be two. They are expected to both possess the melody <code> [Black Song]."

“……Two of them is troublesome. Will we be splitting them between us two?”

Shasa’s expression increased in severity.

This was the girl that had dealt with a Yuugenshu of that calibre carelessly.

“Yes. It’s redundant, but a Yuugenshu in possession of the “Black Song” will render barrier type, advent type, territory type and worship type shinryoku completely ineffective. Please counter it with only baptism type spells.“

“I know. We can’t lose……let’s show those invaders what it looks like when humans get serious. ——And speaking of which.”

Shasa casually tilted her head with an adorable face.

“How about Yuto? What happened with her?”

“She is engaged in battle with the pack of invaders at the western airspace. There are also those possessing the “Black Song” over there but she said to help the fourteen year old child rather than her.“

Shasa turned her face away with a pout that was a youthful action befitting of her age.

“……Unfortunately, I have no idea who that could be about.”

“Is there a need to answer?“

“I don’t need it. ——Then let’s meet up eight hours later; I’ll designate the location shortly. I’m counting on you, [Machine God Mikuva]-san.”

Shasa smiled teasingly.

On the other end, the silver-haired girl whose expression could not be read shifted her scarlet eyes and,

“I believe I have introduced myself as Ilis before?“

……Ilis? She said Ilis.

……Also, just now……Machine God Mikuva……what exactly does that……

“Well then, we’ll be going now.”

“Eh? U-umm.”

Being glanced at by Shasa, Ymy hurriedly fixed her posture.

“I’m sorry, I still have things to do. The Yuugenshu in the city have been wiped out by Ilis, so it’s safe. It is safe to return to your house so”

“Wa-wait! Umm, you all are———”

She reached out towards the two who were leaving.

She reached out.

.

There, Ymy’s consciousness paused once again.

浮遊大陸オービエ・クレア

Orbie Clar

vel harp riris noi elmei bediws, Uhw kis

Ec pheno r-isel noi elems kau

Ris sia sophia, De elmei nett, yehe

Ris sia sophia, De clue nett, shela

meh getie lishe, meh mutis evhe

Sera, van

Ao/ De Orbie Clar

Ec pheno, steris pheno yum

Sew yum r-vequs nor

Sew ele sis xeph-Ye-clar ria Eeo, nefit

was Kiris jeh jas

Elma sia

Miqui

Ris sia sophia, leide-

—— Kyel les

"……Uu."

A cool feeling against her cheek. When Ymy came to, she was lying face down on the floor.

"This is……the Cathedral?"

She absent-mindedly rubbed her closed eyes. The brass-colored ritual implements, azure sky ceiling, the chill that wrapped the entire room. Without a doubt, it was the Cathedral she was very familiar with.

……What was that……just now?

……A dream?……

No, her memories were too vivid for a dream and there was this sense of fatigue. It felt like she had just traveled the boundary between a dream and the present.

"That's right, that person——"

The woman whose background was unknown and went by the name of Tsali. The person responsible for showing her this thing that she distinguish as a dream or reality. It was best to ask her. However.

"……She's not here?"

Ymy sprung up and looked around but there was no trace of her.

It was like a mirage or heat haze. In that case, maybe everything including her existence was a dream? She took a deep breath with her hand on her chest.

At that moment, she looked at her own vestments by chance and her breath stopped.

"——! This is……"

A part of the flank of the vestments was slightly torn.

When did it tear? Yesterday? No, the maintenance was left to a seamstress specialized in vestments. She wouldn't have ignored damage this large and Ymy herself would have noticed if she tore a hole this large.

In that case, it was torn today and furthermore——

.

"Being pushed back by the surge of mateki, she was blown backwards. Blown back around ten metres, she slammed hard into the large trees lining the park."

.

"No way……that can't"

She stared down at her feet while shocked stiff. There was mud clinging to the tips. If this was also something that stuck on when she collapsed during the battle with the Yuugenshu, then it made sense.

“It wasn’t a dream……?”

Ymy fell to her knees and placed her hand on the ground in blank amazement.

It was all real. That world and what she saw?

“……That was the world a thousand years ago.”

The world without Hyouketsu Kyoukai. A world threatened by Yuugenshu that held a power which couldn’t be imagined in present times. It was harsher, more ruthless, laden with despair ——— but those two.

The girls named Shasa and Ilis had fought.

.

“Let’s show those invaders what it looks like when humans get serious.“

.

Even in that harsh of a world, they were still fighting with all they had.

“……”

Filled with fervent passion and serenity, they were both heated and cool.

……That was probably all true.

She didn’t know who the woman called Tsali was nor her true purpose for showing her the scene just now.

But what she had seen in that world —— the two girls, Shasa and Ilis, fighting Yuugenshu to save someone, had not been a lie. She felt that.

“……”

She breathed in the frozen air and exhaled.

“I am……an idiot.”

At the base of her heart, she still had naive views about how fearsome Yuugenshu were.

She had thought that they were safe so long as the priestesses prayed to maintain Hyouketsu Kyoukai. But that was wrong: at the Garden of Corrupted Song <Eden> that lay beneath the barrier, Yuugenshu that were beyond the imagination of the current world lurked. There was no doubt that they were biding time until the day the barrier was destroyed.

Protecting the world from those monsters was the duty of the Priestesses.

……I am still lacking that power.

……I have to become strong. In mind and body, and in shinryoku.

If she didn't, she couldn't help Sheltis either. As long as she couldn't purify the mateki, she couldn't help him who had fallen to the Garden of Corrupted Song <Eden>.

"……Sheltis,"

Her voice echoed. While listening to her voice that resounded within the cool silence——

"It feels……like I've understood something."

Ymy drew her two hands near her gently pulsing chest and closed her eyes slowly.

Chapter 4 – At the Deep Green Lands

Part 1

The far-off cry of wild birds could be heard.

An area of scattered large trees that towered towards the sky. Within that world of deep green, advancing would bring an equal amount of green and serenity.

A vivid orange transport vehicle continued on ahead within that silence.

A detour made to the giant trees to avoid the swamplands. Finally —— the dense pack of trees thinned out and the transport vehicle stopped at a point that had good visibility of the area.

"Oh—, what an amazing sea of trees. It reminds me of the forests of the floating archipelago <Lagoon> we went to last time."

"You're being too loud, Ilis. The time we went to the floating archipelago <Lagoon> is a secret from everybody."

Calming the high-spirited Ilis down, Sheltis placed his luggage on his shoulder.

"So we've arrived. It's the final selection so don't get careless."

"……Since we've come this far."

Kagura and Monica stood up with their luggage in their hands. He moved to follow the two who exited through the back doors on either side of the vehicle but suddenly stopped to face the teammate behind him.

"We're here, it seems."

"I got it. Sheesh, what a pain this was. An overnight transport, and on top of that, the road was bumpy so I only managed to get an hour of sleep?"

Vaiel, who had been reclining at the seat furthest in, got up.

"Let's get going; it seems like we'll lose points if we keep the examiner waiting."

Sighing at the weight of the luggage biting into his shoulder, Sheltis descended from the transport vehicle.

“Hurry and line up, you guys; Nash’s unit has already lined up —— now then, mission number 16, [Governmental Sector Deployment]‘s final selection shall commence.”

The examiner, I’sa, pointed around at her surroundings.

“As you can see, this is deep within the Nature District. It’s closer to a biotope than the Living Districts. There are no first-class dangerous species like dragons but there isn’t a lack of large species that will attack people. We’re out in this place so there’s no guarantee that it’s safe……more than anything, there is a chance of encountering Yuugenshu.”

The Regular Guard surveyed the expressions of the eight Cadets.

“I think you understand but the protection of the Queen and the Priestesses at the tower is the mission of the Guards. What you guys will do is one part of that, a patrol for the purpose of investigating the Yuugenshu.”

Of course, Tenketsu Palace <Sophia> had instruments for detecting Yuugenshu.

However, they measured the wavelength of a Yuugenshu’s mateki so they could not track those that appeared and disappeared. For that reason, the last measure was to confirm by eye —— patrols were carried out in a human-wave tactical effort.

“You’re likely well-aware of this as well but the first and third rank Priestesses are also patrolling the perimeter of the floating continent. Well, that just means this is that important of a job for the Guards as well. Act without forgetting that……here, Sheltis, distribute these.”

“Eh? Ah, ahh. Understood.”

He handed everyone theirs from the stack of paper I’sa passed him. The first sheet showed the three-day schedule. Then the second was a map of this area’s surroundings.

“Everyone’s got one now, I see. You can understand the first one by looking at it, so I’ll explain the second sheet. We’re currently at the white circle and the area bordered in red is the patrol area. The eastern side is Nash’s and the western one is Monica’s.”

The area indicated in red likely stretched out several kilometres in all four directions. With the three day period in mind, it was a safe amount of land.

“Then the all-important schedule and……hey, hey, what’s this immediate departure upon arrival about?”

Vaiel sighed after looking at the schedule.

“Then will you sleep outdoors? I forgot to mention this, but the blue circle is the cottage you will be using. There’s no food or water until you reach it.”

“……God damn it.”

I’sa smiled loosely in response to Vaiel who was in a bad mood.

“You understand, right? By the way, I’ll be patrolling alongside you guys as the examiner. I intend to do the first day will be with Nash’s unit, the second with Monica’s.”

Part 2

The ground was strewn with tree leaves.

They entered the path which was, with its muddiness despite the lack of rainfall or other precipitation over several days coupled with the large trees that were gathered here and there which made it even more complex, a path which couldn't be called such.

"Hey, hey, hey, what's with this place. Is this really a path? This is just the inside of a forest."

"……Don't split off, Vaiel, you'll become a lost child."

Monica's tone was completely serious. Gripping her Crossed Rods <Rosario> in her right hand, she parted the branches with her free left hand and continued in that manner.

"Kagura, we're going in the right direction, right?"

The third member following after Monica and Vaiel was Kagura.

"Yes. Please continue like this for another five minutes. We'll be going off the shortest path to the cottage but this path is safe."

"Safe? This kind of spiderweb-like route is?"

"The shortest route is the habitat of cry birds and home to many of them. They're harmless but their cries are very loud and will cover up the footsteps of dangerous wild beasts. Dangerous, right?"

"……Shut up."

Leaking out a grumbling complaints that showed he consented, Vaiel went silent.

"Sheltis as well, I think you understand already, but please be wary of the rear."

"Understood, the rear is secure."

He glanced behind again before replying to Monica. The tail of the group is the most dangerous spot and could become a blind spot so the responsibility attached to it was great.

"It doesn't look like anything in particular is there; I'sa's also not here."

"I'sa……that examiner? If it's about her, she said she'd be moving together with Nash's group."

"It's an examiner's trick."

Having them let down their guard by saying she would go with the other unit, but in actuality, she would be following them secretly.

"Whether the unit is slacking off or not, or skipping out or not. You'd get a large demerit from not realizing the examiner was tailing you."

"……I see. I didn't think that far."

Monica smiled wryly while sidestepping a protruding rock. Then the third in the line, Kagura, who was operating her machine pearl <Machina>, raised her face suddenly.

"By the way, Monica, what do you plan to do?"

"About what?"

"This patrol is basically for the purpose of finding the Yuugenshu that came up to the floating continent. Most of them would be found in their biotope but the chance of individuals penetrating as far as the Nature District isn't zero. That it's not zero means it wouldn't be strange to come across one right now around here."

If they just found traces of a Yuugenshu, it would be settled with reporting to the examiner. The question was what to do if they stumbled upon not the traces but the actual Yuugenshu.

To run away or to engage in battle.

"Haa? It's obvious that we should run away from that kind of thing. Cadet Guards like us can't win against that. Run away and report to that examiner brat! That'd settle it."

Vaiel turned around to face Kagura who was behind him.

"Fumu, you're being quite realistic."

" 'Course I am."

"……So he says. Well?"

Kagura's words seemed to be testing her. On the other side, the unit leader that stood at the head of the group hadn't opened her mouth yet and continued to remain silent.

"We'll decide based on the situation."

Monica swung the crossed rods <Rosario> in her hand. Breaking the branch that was obstructing her path, she kept on looking ahead the entire time.

"It will depend on the Yuugenshu's strength……as long as it's not a special case, I have a feeling that fighting would go well for this team."

"Hah? Hey, hey, hey, captain-san, what kind of joke is this?"

The ever-unapologetic Vaiel shrugged his shoulders.

"Cadet Guards like us can't win against Yuugenshu. Before that, we haven't even seen a real——"

"We have."

She suppressed Vaiel's words with a nod.

"We have seen and fought one. Since I was……an apprentice Priestess until three years ago."

This time, it was Vaiel's turn to be coerced into silence.

An apprentice Priestess' rank was the same as a Regular Guard. As part of their training to become a Priestess, they would form a unit with Regular Guards and fight with Yuugenshu on patrols.

"……First time I've heard you were an apprentice Priestess."

"You don't believe me?"

"I don't get it."

It was expected that Vaiel would spit that out. Because an apprentice Priestess who held the same rank as a Regular Guard had purposefully lowered their own rank to that of a Cadet Guard.

"Ahem, well that would be a long story, so let's just leave that aside."

Privy to the circumstances, Kagura cleared her throat.

"The words our unit leader spoke are true. If you doubt them, please consult the tower's digital information. Her name is also upon the apprentice Priestess list of three years ago."

"……Moron, like I'd do something that annoying."

He seemed to feel a certain amount of credibility in Kagura's information. Putting both hands in his pockets, he only groaned in annoyance.

"Then at that hypothetical time, you plan on a hard struggle?"

"Of course I intend to fight at the head but it'll be rough with just me alone. Half……more than half of it will be Sheltis."

"Eh. ……Ah, r-right. I'll do my best."

He straightened up reflexively when his name came up suddenly. ……He had thought it would be coming but didn't expect it to be so frankly stated.

"Heeh, you, huh."

Vaiel turned to him with a dubious look.

"Well, do as you like. I'll say this ahead of time, but if it comes to that, I'm bolting by myself."

"I see."

"……Indifferent, aren't you, captain-san."

Vaiel, with a sour expression, drew near Monica who had been speaking calmly to the end.

“I’m saying I’ll ditch my comrades and run. You’d normally be angry.”

“If you really planned to ditch your comrades, you wouldn’t say so beforehand.“

The one who answered was Kagura.

“……! Don’t just decide that by yourself; I’m seriously gonna run by myself! Got it! Don’t cry about it later!”

Vaiel thrust out a finger and Kagura calmly gazed at him.

“Umm, umm~, say, say, could I say one thing?“

Machine crystal <Ilis> interjected with a nonchalant tone.

“Ilis, we’re busy right now——”

“You said we should proceed straight ahead for five minutes, but hasn’t it already been long past that?“

“Ah……”

Four peoples’ voices overlapped at that spot.

Part 3

Seven hours later.

“Th-that’s it. It’s our cottage.”

Comparing the digital map on the machine pearl <Machina> many times with what was before them, Kagura let out a small cheer.

“……It took a long time.”

“……It took over three times the original estimate of two hours after all.”

“The cute Ilis was bored and bored and about to die.“

“……I’m too tired to say anything.”

“Sh-shut up! I just made a little mistake on the route and we took the long way around!”

With her cheeks dyed bright red, Kagura swung both her arms around.

“It’s not just Kagura’s fault. ……At any rate, let’s check it out. We need to confirm the cottage’s interior as well.”

It was a two-floor cottage built with light metals. Against the deep green backdrop of the surrounding forest, the bright white paint of the walls made it obvious even at a glance from far away.

——Confirmed——

The card reader that scanned Monica's emblem blinked. They could hear the sound of electronic locks being released behind the door and the mechanical door slid to the side.

"I'm surprised, it's the same door as the dorms of Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>'s lodgings."

Holding her luggage over her shoulder, Monica passed through the open door.

"……The interior is impressive as expected."

In the lit living room, Monica left her luggage on a chair and took a deep breath.

The residential kitchen had a refrigerator and sofa. With a table and whiteboard for meetings and a wireless computer, it certainly was a facility used for patrolling.

"Kagura and Vaiel, go ahead and check out the second floor. I'll look outside. Sheltis, you have the communicator. Inform the examiner."

"Understood. I'll tell her we arrived at the cottage."

He put down the luggage on his shoulder, took out and set up the large communicator on the ground.

If it was a simple transmission, then the emblems had such a function, but for reporting unit activities like this, it was customary to use a reliable communicator like this.

"I'm pretty sure it was this button——"

He pushed the red power supply within the blackened body and placed the wireless receiver in his ear.

"Ah-……testing, testing. ……It's strange how I can really hear with just this alone."

"Don't say stupid things and just get on with the report."

He ended up being flat-out interrupted by I'sa.

"Umm, then I'll make the report. Monica's unit has arrived at the cottage."

"Just that?"

"Eh, just that……meaning"

"Meaning you finally arrived at the cottage."

The other end of the receiver sounded not angry so much as astonished.

"Nash's unit also just arrived at the cottage but they've already patrolled half of the assigned area today."

"Geh……that's fast."

"And on your end——"

“No, no, no, have no worries! Umm……l-look, we’ll just save today. We’ll get our bearings for today and wrap it all out in one go tomorrow!”

“I’ll be looking forward to that. I’ll meet up with your unit at your cottage tomorrow, so for today until 23:00, work on a schedule for tomorrow and present it.“

“……Understood, examiner. With this, tomorrow’s gonna be rough.”

Sheltis cut off the receiver with a clack and collapsed onto the sofa.

Part 4

“……We have to do our best tomorrow.”

Monica looked the comrades of her unit after they gathered in the living room once again.

Drawing a map on the giant graph paper laid out atop the table, she wrote down the patrol root in red pen.

“Nash’s unit will probably finish patrolling their assigned area tomorrow. At the very least, I’d like for us to follow suit. We have to go around the assigned area all in one day.”

“We will depart at four in the morning and return late into the night. ……We’ll walk way too much and have muscle pains the next day.”

Propping herself up on her hands against the table, Kagura muttered in a soliloquy.

The route drawn on the map was basically a net. There was no telling how far it would take to walk the entirety.

“Tomorrow will be a day of endurance. We’ll be departing at four in the morning, so keep that in mind. We’ll finish off here for today, so each of us should rest up.”

“The first and second floors both have three rooms each so there was an excess in rooms. The first floor will be for the men with the second floor for women. Here, these are the rooms’ card keys.”

Kagura indicated the card keys upon the table.

“I’ll just say this ahead of time, but if you come up to the second floor in the middle of the night, I’ll shoot with you with a stun gun, no questions asked.”

“Fool, like I’d have any interest in brats with no sex appeal like you guys.”

Vaiel took the card key and snorted.

“Fu, you don’t understand; true, my body is still not fully developed, but a slender body that seems like it would snap with only a touch has its own merits. Especially that one time Monica helped——”

“Why are you throwing my name out right there!?”

Monica covered up Kagura’s mouth that was speaking.

“A-at any rate……save the stamina for engaging in entertaining conversation for tomorrow.”

Monica took a card and folded her arms.

“Now are there any questions? If not, we’ll end off here.”

“Ah, just one thing……it’s not really that big of a thing.”

The three gazes fell in this direction as Sheltis timidly raised his hand.

“……What are we doing about dinner?”

The unit once again felt nervousness run at this instant.

“This is a problem.”

“Yes, this is a grave issue.”

Looking into the refrigerator stationed in the kitchen, the female pair of Monica and Kagura grimaced.

Within the freezer were vacuum-sealed bread, vegetables and smoked meat that was salted to preserve it. On the shelf beside it was a full assortment of spices. The variety and amount were both bountiful so it was well enough for three days or even a week, but the problem was——

“Fumu, fumu. The things that can be eaten without cooking are really just the packaged bread and bottled water. Well, if they were cooked they couldn’t be preserved so it really can’t be helped.“

At machine crystal <Ilis>’ calm words, the two female representatives exchanged looks again.

“……Kagura, can you cook?”

“……Monica as well, this is your time to shine as the unit captain.”

“……You know that I was an apprentice Priestess. I put all I had into my training and had no time for something like cooking.”

“……I also am working as a researcher for the Tower Control Bureau alongside being a Guard.”

It would appear that both of them were weak at cooking.

“……Kagura, what’s this flat iron tool?”

“……According to what I’ve read, it seems to be known as a frying pan. You use it like……this as a weapon to hit your opponent, I think.”

“……It seems like you could use it as a shield too. But why is there a weapon in the kitchen?”

Correction. Weak wasn’t how it would be described. Staring fixedly at the frying pan, the two ladies were discussing some frightening things with serious expressions.

“U-um, you two……a frying pan is for frying things……”

“Sheltis!”

“Y-yes!?”

In an instant, the two of them overlapped their voices and turned towards him.

“How good are you at cooking!?”

“No……I’m sorry if you were expecting something but there’s not really a big difference between us.”

His position was different from them; rather than using it for cooking or such, he spent every spare hour training with his twin swords.

“This is bad, really bad. As I thought, somebody’s going to have to take the plunge and try cooking.”

“However, Monica, taking a risk here is not a good idea. Rather than everybody here retiring tomorrow from stomach pains, it would be best to go with the packaged bread”

“But that won’t be enough for us——”

The two who had started discussing again didn’t notice. There was a fragrant smell filling up the kitchen they were in.

“Hmm, there’s a good smell.”

Sizzle……the first one who realized that there was the sound of something being fried was Sheltis. Turning around, he found a young man with smoked meat and vegetables atop a frying pan on the fire.

“Eh, don’t tell me, Vaiel can cook?”

“‘Course. As a man, what would one do if he couldn’t prepare the meals he ate.”

While heating the ingredients on the frying pan, he quickly cut the remaining meat and vegetables into bite-sized pieces and spread them over the nabe. Solid soup and salt and pepper, with just the peel of dried fruits that had been sliced thrown in for the scent. Amongst that, a toaster that had been set up who-knows-when had browned bread peeping out.

To do this much in such a short time —— this man, he’s capable!

In response to the spectacle unfolding before their eyes, the three exchanged looks with their eyes shining.

“……It’s a complete loss; who would have thought that we’d find the unit’s final weapon here.”

“Yeah, I thought Vaiel was a capable man. As I thought, the men of my unit are different.”

“It came, it’s here! With this, our victory tomorrow is unshaken!”

The three sent a grand applause from behind him but——

“Ahh? Ain’t you guys misunderstanding something?”

“Eh……”

The three's expressions froze.

"Who said I'd make your portions? Like I'd do something that much of a pain in the ass."

"……"

"You guys are naive. You're not kids, so nobody's going to help you if you're in trouble."

Vaiel didn't notice as he immersed himself in his lecture, arms crossed.

That Monica, Kagura and Sheltis had each grabbed the weapon nearest them and were edging closer.

"Got it? If you do, then make your portion yourself……mm? What's with you guys, standing there wordlessly with a frying pan, pepper grinder and chopping board——"

"Hand over dinneeeeeerrrrr!"

The three that had gone wild attacked.

"Guhaaa!……Y-you guys! Three against one is cowardlyyyyy————————!"

Pushed down in the blink of an eye, Vaiel caved in to the force of numbers.

At the same time, in a cottage far away.

"……"

In the other cottage, I'sa the examiner, could hear the sequence of events coming from the wiretap as she sighed in exhaustion.

"A unit that has internal strife from stealing food……this is terrible."

Part 5

The smell of earth was carried upon the wind. Inside the forest that was visible behind the steam that had humidity mixed in, the figures of five people walked on the desolated animal trail that couldn't even be called a path.

"Ahh, damn it. I'm sleepy and sluggish……and because of the humidity, the ground is sticky and annoying."

The one who was grumbling endlessly by himself was the third in the line, a young man with blond hair who was the tallest of the group.

"Vaiel, don't be so noisy and look around you. This isn't just a stroll."

"I go—t it. I tell you if I find the mist of mateki, the traces of mateki or I feel a presence hiding. Right?"

Monica who stood at the forefront of the line assented without turning around. Just like yesterday, her left hand was empty and the blackened crossed rods <Rosario> in her right hand glinted with a dull shine.

Looking at that——

“Fuun. That girl, she’s overly serious, but she might fit the role of a captain. There’s one noisy problem child, but she’s keeping him down somehow……”

At the very back of the line, I’sa the examiner smiled like something was interesting.

The second day was the day that their unit would be traveling with the examiner. Their every movement being scrutinized and this feeling of being unable to settle down had both already continued on from when they’d awoken at four in the morning until now several hours later.

“That kind of thing is also graded?”

“Of course. So that nothing is left up to arbitrary decision by the examiner, it’s a given that the basics of the grading are extremely picky.”

She probably won’t say. Thinking that, Sheltis turned around and she had told him honestly with an affable smile.

“By the way, if just by grading, Nash’s group is perfect. The unit’s discipline, capacity in patrolling and in their reports to the examiner, there’s nothing to mention.

“……That’s a story to add pressure.”

“That’s what I’m doing. Because in grades, you’re completely losing.”

I’sa combed her blonde hair that shone even in the dark forest. It was in a small voice so it probably didn’t reach Monica, but Kagura might have caught wind of it.

“……Well, in the first place, there was nothing good to say about that group’s attitude towards the examiner. If there was a demerit to be given, that’s where it would be. Even then, their total is outstanding.”

“Their attitude wasn’t good?”

“That would be him in your group, right? Nash’s group is rebellious. It seems they’ve been a unit for a long time so they have enough merit points. Amongst them, they believe that they’re already Regular Guards. That’s why they have a tendency to take the words of a Regular Guard examiner lightly.”

“Yes, I told Nash in accordance with those grades. However”

Do you understand what I want to say? —— I’sa smiled with that kind of challenging look in her eyes.

“Nash’s group is here with the intention to win with only that demerit. Do you get it? For them, this kind of demerit is like a handicap.”

“You mean they’re looking down on us that much?”

“That’s right. For me, well……I more or less know about you and Monica but you haven’t been a unit for very long and there are points about subordination I’d like to groan about. Nash’s group understands their superior position very well.”

……Kagura also said something similar.

That it was his job to give orders in the unit battles. He would look at how the battle was progressing and put Monica and Kagura’s specialties to use by controlling his surroundings. She said he would have to adapt to that kind of new way of battling.

“But it’s strange.”

“Why Nash’s group is rebelling against me that much?”

Yes, even moreso since Nash’s unit had been completing missions for a long time. When they became Regular Guards, they would also have to think about forming up with I’sa as fellow Regular Guards depending on the situation.

Having discord over a trivial thing like this would only do harm.

“They’re the same as me.”

“……The same?”

“Not too long ago, in the western area of the Nature District, a case where a unit of Cadet Guards ceased contact occurred. An instructor from headquarters was also in the group so they gathered the best of the best and dispatched a rescue unit to the location they thought the unit was lost at.”

“……That wouldn’t be”

“Yes. The case from that time. The case of ‘Golden’ Maha’s attack. At that time, the first rescue unit chosen was Nash’s. And then same as me, they lost.”

Snap.

I’sa toes snapped a small branch.

“Do you get it? A man who was outstanding until becoming a Regular Guard was all of a sudden mixed up in a case he didn’t understand and injured; it’s his chagrin from having the position of a Regular Guard distanced from him. The Instructor had expectations for him which is why he was recommended to the rescue unit but it became the feeling of having betrayed those expectations.”

“……”

He shouldn’t not understand it. Having ascended to an Elite Guard, the despair of losing the entirety of his position after falling into the Garden of Corrupted Song <Eden> —— Sheltis had also tasted that.

“I don’t know if it’s right to call it impatience but I think he hasn’t come to terms with it even now. That’s why he’s leading a unit despite not having fully recovered.”

That rebelliousness had become a distortion, and manifested as a rebellious spirit against Regular Guards.

"……That's frustrating."

"Well, but that's that. There are those who should sympathize with him but that doesn't mean I shouldn't strike back as the examiner. The exam will proceed fairly."

I'sa brushed a leaf off her skirt.

Like that, they both kept their silence——

"By the way, this is a personal question, but you said you knew my onee-sama?"

He certainly remembered saying that in front of the door to the training grounds.

"Because the name of Ishtar is famous even amongst the Elite Guards."

"……Could it be"

Her small voice he could feel from behind resonated with his slight shaking.

"You've fought with onee-sama?"

"……Can't be. I'm a Cadet Guard and she's the Cadres Guard. Our positions are completely different."

"That's right. If that's so, then that's fine. I was just a little interested."

It looked like she had something left to say. Leaving behind that lingering feeling, I'sa fell silent.

"We should take a break soon."

The light murmuring of a river carried over.

Monica stopped as they approached an open rocky area.

"Ah— so hot. How many hours more is this gonna continue?"

Vaiel fluently dipped his hands in the flowing water. Just like that, he scooped up water and washed his face and Kagura who was drinking the water downstream knitted her brows.

"H-hey, do that kind of thing downstream! I nearly drank the water you washed your face in!"

"Ah? It's your fault for being downstream."

"No, it is your fault for being upstream."

Putting aside the two who were glaring at each other——

"Monica, how much have we walked now?"

"Embellishing it a bit, about thirty percent. We might return to the cottage in the dead of night, or it'll go right through into the morning."

"……That's right."

Sitting down on the rocky area that was jutting out, Sheltis looked up at the brilliantly shining morning sun. They'd walked for five or six hours. The sun that had been at the horizon when they left now neared the zenith.

……In the future, this will be something we have to experience even if we don't like it.

……It would be for the best if we suffered a little right now.

The center of the floating continent was the Living District, beyond that lay the Nature District and either further out was the Biotope. This one would end with the Nature District but they'd be entrusted with patrolling the Biotope as well when they became Regular Guards.

It was the turf of first-class dangerous creatures starting with dragon types.

Regardless of noon or night, the patrol missions were always fraught with danger. It would last for about a week, but during that time, he had no memories of sleeping enough.

……That's right, I wonder if I'sa has been to the Biotope before.

"Say, I'sa. Have you been to the Biotope——"

There was no response.

"I see……I got it. After going around the indicated area once, there were only traces at that one place. Yes, there were also traces of an escape, right?"

The female Regular Guard who was more upstream than anybody in the unit was currently in a conversation on the small communicator in her hand. Without blinking even once, her expression as she held the communicator to her ear had slight traces of tension.

"Pursuit? That's a job for Regular Guards. Yes, please contact the Guard Institute of Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>. I will be returning in the middle of the night."

She cut off the conversation and returned the communicator to her belt holder.

A breath that wasn't a sigh or deep breath leaked out from between I'sa lips.

"It doesn't seem like that was a regular contact."

Listening to the conversations of your superiors is a demerit —— or so I'd like to say, but I'll let you off this time."

Getting off the rock she was sitting on, she looked down at the unit members lined up downstream. Normally, this should be where she gave a high-pitched laugh.

"Listen up, okay, I have a notice. Sorry for doing this in the middle of a break but I have something to say."

That expression contained the same tension as when she was on the communicator.

"There was a report from Nash's unit. ——It seems they found traces of a Yuugenshu."

Monica gripped her crossed rods <Rosario>, Kagura held her machine pearl <Machina> and Vaiel, who sat away from the group, knit his brows slightly.

“The location is the northern area of the Nature District, ward 8, on the western side of section 68. It extends several metres in all directions and the large trees and ground, whatever it may be, have been corrupted by mateki and corroded. An image of the scene was also transmitted, ……eight or nine times out of ten, there’s no mistake.”

“Our current location is ward 8, section 4’s north side. It would take time to get there. What shall we do?”

Kagura’s machine pearl <Machine> displayed a digital map.

“The assignment shall continue; that’s also written in the Guard Institute’s manual, right?”

I’sa response was quick.

“It’s not odd to find traces of a Yuugenshu in the middle of an assignment. If the assignment was stopped partway because of that, it wouldn’t work. That’s why, well, we’ll just respond as usual.”

The assignment would continue so long as the Cadet Guards had no qualms.

The fastest in terms of dealing with the Yuugenshu would be the Regular Guard unit closest to the scene, so they would be in pursuit.

“What’s the Yuugenshu’s direction of movement?”

“Nash’s unit reported that they would remain on standby at their cottage so the details are still unknown. At any rate, a Regular Guard unit is in pursuit so I think this will be confirmed soon.”

“……It’s quite tense.”

Kagura murmured with the same expressionless face as always.

“If the Yuugenshu’s escape route overlaps with our patrol route by a one in ten thousand chance”

“Observing the response at that time is the assignment, so be prepared.”

Four metal spheres floated around I’sa’s proximity.

They were the puppeteer I’sa’s puppets, endowed with shinryoku as her weapon. She had increased that to five previously but it seems she returned to using four as she was used to it.

“I’ll give the orders in an encounter. Everyone, keep that in mind.”

Saa……kasasaa……

An instant. Directly behind the rocky area Kagura was sitting at, the thicket shook unnaturally.

——No way.

“Kagura, get away from there!”

Materializing the translucent purple blades, he carried the twin swords in his hand and moved into position to defend her. In replacement of Kagura who hurriedly lept to the rear, he held his twin swords at the ready at the frontlines closest to that spot.

The time that wouldn't forgive even a blink. From there, three seconds……five seconds……ten seconds passed.

Kasaa……sasaa……

The thicket swayed once again and something flew out from within.

"——A rock fox?"

Looking at the fox that jumped along and was getting further, Vaiel murmured.

It had blackish gray fur, large ears and a small tail. It was a herbivorous species of fox that lived in the Nature District. Its numbers were small so it was rare to come across one.

"……Jeez, don't surprise me, damned fox popping out."

"It's better than a Yuugenshu. Rather than that, we should end our break. There's still a lot to go."

Gripping her crossed rods <Rosario> with both hands, Monica flapped her formal wear.

Following that were Kagura then Vaiel.

"It's rare that a rock fox would come out in front of people."

The only one left behind of the unit, Sheltis continued to leer at the interior of the thicket.

"Ilis, what's the possibility that the rock fox just now was being chased by something?"

"It's not zero. And it was something scary enough that it didn't mind being seen by people. I think that possibility exists."

"……Ilis, go into standby as well, so you can produce the blades at a moment's notice."

Sheathing the twin swords that had lost their blades into their holders, he went off after Monica.

The deep green forest of trees, the reddish-brown earth and the perfectly clear azure sky.

Sunset —— the time when everything was died in a color that was a mix of yellow and scarlet. The cottage that was one shade of white as well, its walls were dyed in a vivid shade of scarlet.

"I'm saved. I'm already exhausted."

"Sheesh, in the end, after that, not a single animal came out. Such a fuss."

Kagura and Vaiel continued to sigh. They were normally talkative, but because of the fatigue from the second half of the patrol, they had become silent.

"……In the end, we completed the seventy percent we planned to do in the morning."

Monica folded her arms with a complicated expression. At first, they had had the intention of patrolling the entire area but she had suggested a sudden change. They would give up on the late-night patrolling and return at sunset.

“I think it was a decisive judgment.”

Exchanging looks with Monica who was talking to herself, Sheltis pointed at the setting sun.

The sea of trees in which they couldn’t tell if a Yuugenshu was hiding. For Cadet Guards like them, searching in the forest at night after the sun had sunk was fraught with peril.

Should they persevere to match up with Nash’s unit or pull back to ensure the safety of the unit.

At the end of troubling over that, Monica had chosen the latter.

“The assignment is to patrol the assigned area over three days. It’s obviously better to get it done faster but we’ll just be thorough to make up for what we’re missing.”

“……That’s right. The test lasts until noon tomorrow, after all.”

Maybe she had wanted support from somebody else as Monica’s expression relaxed.

“Anyway, let’s end today’s patrol. We need to make an official report to the examiner……or so I thought, but she’s in the middle of a conversation with Nash’s unit.”

I’sa had the communicator up to her ear. But what let on that something was strange was her voice being too quiet.

……She’s not talking?

I’sa was wordlessly holding the communicator to her ear.

Normally, like this afternoon, she would give affirmations or give orders as the examiner.

And then.

“……No response. It looks like they got done in.”

I’sa muttered while putting force into her hand that was holding the communicator.

“Everyone, I’ll have you perform a single job now.”

“Mm? Hey, hey, what’s this, you’re not gonna say you’re tacking on an exam, right.”

In response to Vaiel who was conspicuously scowling,

“I won’t say that. It’s not an exam, it’s a real battle.”

I’sa cut him off with a calm tone.

“All members, listen well. Communications from Nash’s end have ceased. I think it’s likely that they engaged the Yuugenshu in combat and were wiped out. ……You understand, right? As members of Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>, what you must do in times of receiving a direct injury from a Yuugenshu.”

Placing the communicator in its holder, the Regular Guard girl held up her left hand.

—— [Deploy] ——

Responding to the puppeteer's directions, four metal spheres rose into the air.

"The time is seventeen hundred hours and twenty-three minutes. In accordance with article nine of the Guard Institute's regulations, the assignment is temporarily on hold. Starting now, the Cadet Guard unit's rescue and Yuugenshu pursuit shall commence. ——Come with me."

Part 6

The time was about one hour ago.

Jyuuuuu……

Even now, the scars upon the earth continued to give up smoke. Grass and earth had fused, and the trees had withered and died standing without a single leaf. The smoldering deep purple groaned just like a living creature and that cursed area was spreading even more.

——The corruption of mateki.

Glancing at the wounds from the Yuugenshu's escape route, Nash leaked a slight smile.

"There's barely been any time since the corruption; it's been driven into a corner."

It was easily several hours since they'd made their report to the examiner. It had taken a considerable amount of distance but that would come to an end shortly.

"Kimberly, Lasdax, just like always. It's a single Yuugenshu."

The great sword user and heavy spear knight each moved up wordlessly.

"Myun-fa, at the same time the Yuugenshu flies out, play one shot."

"Leave it to me, I'll play it flashily."

The shinryoku practitioner woman prepared a koto with grace. [T/N: A koto (琴) is a 13-string Japanese instrument. It's ancient.]

——It will happen before we go on a mission. With the merit points from defeating this Yuugenshu, everyone will become a Regular Guard.

There was the merit system which granted merit points for completing a mission, but there were also ways to gain merit points dubbed the "back rules".

That was when one resolved a case that went beyond expectations. Rescue operations during a calamity and discovering a Yuugenshu while on patrol were also included, and defeating it alone could be used to request additional merit points.

……That's right, that's how it should be.

……Like I can always be dallying around in this place. [T/N: "this place" has kanji for "the status of a Cadet Guard".]

It wouldn't end with becoming a Regular Guard. In the future, he would become an Elite Guard and then a Sennenshi.

Though that was so, he was being ordered around by that examiner as she liked and in the end, even received orders that engaging the Yuugenshu was not permitted and he was to stay on standby? This was no joke, since they had enrolled to fight Yuugenshu.

……Who knew that he would hit a standstill at that time.

"There are no enemies before my [Golden Hexahedral]."

The rescue unit pulled together by the Instructor's command. Being chosen for the unit that selected only the best of the best even amongst the Cadet Guards, while heading to the scene with enthusiasm.

"Now beginning intervention. Commencing elimination of the witnesses."

In the face of the monster they met with on the meadow, Nash had been unable to do anything. When he came to, he was lying in the medical wing. That was his first and last humiliation as a Cadet Guard.

……I have no more intention of being content with the status of a Cadet Guard.

"A person who will become a Regular Guard……can't be afraid of a single Yuugenshu."

Leading the unit, they moved to the backside of a large tree.

At the base of the large tree —— not hiding or planning a surprise attack, a beast swathed in a dark purple mist stood there boldly.

……You won't attack?

It was just prepared without even twitching.

"Haa, there are also pleasant Yuugenshu. It's just revealing itself boldly even though it's alone……Myun-fa, cease your ritual. Observe its condition."

A transparent blue bullet.

Loaded with bullets that utilized the Hyouketsu crystals from Hyouketsu Kyoukai, a large revolving pistol was readied.

"I wonder where that fearless confidence is coming from."

Nash looked down the sight and pulled the trigger.

The blasting sound of gunpowder. But——

The bullet simply passed through the body of the beast wrapped in dark purple mist.

"……Wha!?"

What's going on, this is a bullet made from the Hyouketsu crystals formed with shinryoku. It should be a fatal wound with just one shot against a Yuugenshu but there's not a scratch?

"Nash, behind!"

He felt a shiver at Myun-fa's scream and turned around while ignoring the Yuugenshu before him.

North, northeast, east, southeast, south, southwest, west, northwest.

In all eight directions with them at the center —— a Yuugenshu just like the one ahead of them was standing there; they were encircled.

"……There are eight Yuugenshu."

What is the meaning of this. No matter how you look at them, the traces of corruption left behind by the escaping Yuugenshu were only caused by one. Though that's so, there are eight. And when did they appear? They completely had no presence.

……Why did the shinryoku bullet have no effect?

……How did eight of them hide in this forest?

He didn't understand at all.

"……No way."

We had the intention of pursuing, but instead we were guided?

Fifteen minutes after that, communication with Nash's unit was lost.

Final Chapter – The Fourth Person

Part 1

"Instructor? It's me, ……yes, the circumstances are as I communicated earlier."

The sea of trees returned to silence.

Only the examiner girl's tense voice echoed.

"I'd also like to request the location of Nash G. Endolfin's emblem's signal. ——Ward 7, section 3……ward 7? ……independent action, as I thought. Yes, we will proceed to rescue efforts at once."

I'sa who lifted her hidden face shook her head.

"It seems my bad feeling was right on."

Her self-derisive smile that turned to them.

“You remember that the Yuugenshu discovery report was from ward 8, section 68? I gave orders to return to the cottage in that same ward 8 and go on standby. The signal from Nash’s emblem is coming from ward 7.”

Rather than the cottage, contact with Nash’s unit was lost in ward 7. What could be inferred from that——

“……That moron. He went after the Yuugenshu himself.”

Vaiel spat out with a loathsome look.

“Leave the blame for later. For now, we pray that the unit is safe and only think about rescuing them even a moment sooner.”

Leaving behind words with a trailing note, I’sa waved her formal clothes.

“I’ll be temporarily assuming command. Follow me.”

Part 2

The sea of trees was dyed in the singular color of scarlet.

Upon the animal trail shrouded in an eerie silence, the puppeteer girl’s figure ran along as if flying. The solid and pointy bedrock and marsh were ignored by sprinting through the large trees, leaping from branch to branch.

It was a form of movement that rendered the complicated landscape inconsequential as well as circumvented wild beasts. It was a simple spring, but the amount of continuous running needed to cover the harsh territory like this in one hour was truly as expected of a Regular Guard.

——How about this side?

Monica and Vaiel were lined up chasing I’sa who was at the front, with Kagura lagging slightly behind.

It wasn’t by file but simply the order of speed and physical strength. Vaiel had physical strength from his outstanding physique amongst men but the unit captain Monica was also keeping up well.

……It looks like she’s having trouble, but Kagura is also doing her best.

The last of the five people, Sheltis surveyed the backs of the members ahead of him.

——If it’s like this, we can perform the rescue faster than I thought.

“I wonder if we’ll make it.”

“That’s what we’re here for, right?“

Ilis’ reply that could even be called a challenge was correct.

Rescuing the lives of those attacked by Yuugenshu was a race against time. If it formal wear that had carved shinryoku seals applied, then there was more or less a resistance against even a Yuugenshu’s mateki. At any rate, if they arrived before it developed into a serious incident, there was the possibility that Monica’s purification spells would be enough to heal them.

Because they understood this, Kagura was trying her hardest to keep up and Vaiel, wearing his signature displeased expression, didn't seem like he was going to voice any complaints.

Finally.

"……"

I'sa who was at the front wordlessly held her hand parellel to the horizon. Lower your speed —— reading that sign, Monica and Vaiel, followed by Kagura, halted.

The destination was close. At a crawling pace, they silenced their footfalls and pushed through the tree branches. What awaited them after they circled a gigantic tree was——

.

Four Cadet Guards were lying face-down on the ground.

.

"Monica, come with me! Sheltis, Kagura and Vaiel, keep watch on the surroundings!"

I'sa ran towards Nash while quickly sending orders out.

Holding up the black-haired young man, I'sa immediately pressed her finger against the artery in his neck —— after a little while, she breathed out a long sigh with an expression of slight relief.

"It looks like the three over here are also breathing……I'm glad."

Monica sighed, having confirmed the other three's breathing in the same manner. But having been an apprentice Priestess, she soon tightened up her expression and bit on her lip.

"Examiner I'sa, I shall take over the rescue of Nash."

She softly laid down the three people being held up. Monica, with a severe expression, stared at the dark purple mist coming off Nash's formal wear.

——The corruption of mateki.

Yeah, said I'sa with her eyes slightly widened.

"I heard from Instructor Yumelda that you used to be an apprentice Priestess."

"……I wasn't very good at the baptism-type spells right to the end though."

With a shadow falling within her eyes, Monica smiled wryly.

.

[Sia Sec elis arc.....Is io miel]

[That day's dream, once more.....for the sake of that.]

.

The girl's aria that wasn't enough to be a short tune.

Her sakura-colored hair was, by a very deep red —— it became shrouded in particles that shone with a crimson light. The light gathered to form a line which expanded and blew away the dark purple of the mateki.

The mateki eating into Nash's formal wear was purified, then the ground underneath, and then it spread to wash away even the mateki that had infected the large tree to the rear.

"……The corruption of mateki has been repressed for the time being. How's that side?"

"Not doing so well."

Myun-fa —— Kagura scowled as she held up the female shinryoku practitioner. The hand stopping the blood flowing from her shoulder and back wounds was soaked red with the bleeding.

"There's no corruption of mateki but her injuries are more severe. ……She may have taken a surprise attack from behind so there's a really deep scar on her back which might have pierced an artery. The other three also seem to be in the same state."

——A surprise attack from behind.

Remembering their unease with that single phrase from Kagura, the other members turned around.

"Then it's decided. There's no use loitering here."

Shouldering one of the Cadet Guards, Vaiel stood up.

"Come on, let's start heading back. The Yuugenshu that attacked these guys might be hiding close by."

"They're not. There are traces of fleeing."

Staring him head-on, I'sa didn't quiver at all. The scars on the ground that were giving up smoke formed a direct line away from the large tree they were standing at.

"Hey, hey, don't tell me you intend to pursue it……you sane?"

"In just a little under an hour, it'll be night."

I'sa didn't turn around. In the sea of trees that were dyed crimson, the sun that was setting towards the horizon shimmered in the gap between the tree leaves overhead.

"The Yuugenshu at night are dangerous. The dark purple mist that covers their body blends into the night and they're practically invisible……even if we return to the cottage, it'll be dangerous if we receive a surprise attack."

Then they should pursue now and strike.

I'sa's words were filled with a force that wouldn't accept any dissent.

“We’ll be dividing the unit into two groups, the pursuit squad and the rescue squad. Firstly, for the rescue squad that will stay here and look after Nash’s unit……Kagura and Vaiel, can I leave it to you?”

“Understood.”

“Ah? Me?……it’s a lot easier than fighting Yuugenshu so it’s just what I wanted.”

Kagura nodded and Vaiel didn’t seem to have any objections.

“Then it’s settled. Monica who can use shinryoku to resist mateki, ……and that dual swords user over there.”

Not his name but dual swords user. The puppeteer girl presumed to call him that.

“I’m asking just in case but do you have any experience fighting Yuugenshu?”

“I won’t be any trouble.”

He drew out the hilts of the dual swords from the holder on his belt.

“I see. Then come along; don’t betray my expectations, okay?”

After I’sa who rustled her formal wear, Sheltis ran through the sea of trees wordlessly.

Seeing off the three who were following the Yuugenshu’s escape tracks——

“It’s just the two of us.”

“Ahh?”

Vaiel turned around with a sour look and Kagura smiled wryly at his unchanging aggressive tone.

Just the two of them. She had wanted to ask for a long, long time and had searched for a time and place to no avail. She hadn’t thought the chance would come with this timing.

“……Could I ask one thing?”

“What’s this, don’t get all strangely formal.”

She chose to remain wordless in the face of that displeased tone.

“_____”

She silently took off her machine helmet. Deep green hair and ash grey eyes. The girl’s face was young and transient. The signature pointed ears of the Nell folk were exposed.

“……”

For an instant, for just an instant, his expression had certainly changed. She felt that.

“Have I met you before?”

Do you remember me? About me who had collapsed while crossing the desert in the middle of training……and how you piggybacked me all the way to the medical office.

“It’s already been two years.”

“No idea.”

Turning his face to the side, his response was quick.

“……Is that so.”

I knew. I should have known but……as I had expected, he has forgotten me. When I invited him to the unit and trying to drag him in by even proposing a threatening deal, I had hoped that perhaps it would cause him to remember.

“How pointless. Don’t expect too much of people.”

Within the sea of trees dominated by silence, his click of the tongue echoed dully.

“……Is it bad to have expectations?”

“Think about that yourself. It’s because you don’t understand that that you’re a brat.”

Part 3

The land corrupted by mateki gave off smoke as it decayed. That smoke became a path, showing where the Yuugenshu had escaped to.

“Monica, this is about Yuugenshu.”

He ran alongside Monica who leaped over a rock that was sticking out of the ground. Sheltis informed her while confirming her facial expression from the side.

“Keep careful watch on your surroundings while fighting. There might not be just one Yuugenshu.”

“……What did you say?”

Her grey eyes narrowed like a crescent moon.

“But there are only tracks for one Yuugenshu?”

“I know. But that area was very unnatural.”

Monica had been focused on Nash’s recovery and I’sa was checking out the Yuugenshu’s pursuit trail. Kagura and Vaiel had been focusing their attention on keeping vigilance of the surroundings.

On the other hand, he had been concerned with the blade marks and bullet traces gouged in the large trees and ground.

“Did you realize? The surrounding trees and ground where Nash’s unit collapsed had indiscriminate blade marks and bullet holes. If the opponent was a single Yuugenshu, they wouldn’t leave such large traces behind.”

The swords that had failed to strike the target and bullets that had missed the mark were too numerous.

"It was too unnaturally scattered. As far as I know, those kinds of battle traces are only left during times of a Yuugenshu's mental control with mateki."

Mental destruction —— by breaking down reason, it would drive people to one form of rampage. It was like having an ally turn into an enemy. It was the most troublesome thing outside of immediate death.

"Those under mental control will rage without distinction of their enemies and allies so it's easy for there to be blade marks and bullet traces like that."

"You're saying Nash's group was subjected to that?"

"——No."

Keeping his vision on I'sa to the front and staying vigilant of the sides and behind, he shook his head.

"The only one who received mateki this time was Nash. Then the one who was under mental control should also be Nash. Thinking along that line, I looked at the tools of the other three but amongst those three's wounds, there were none inflicted by Nash's weapon. If he had fallen into a panic after being mentally controlled, it wouldn't be strange for at least one of them to have a wound from Nash's weapon."

There were none. That is to say, he hadn't been mentally controlled.

"Then what are you saying?"

"I don't know either. But we need to be prepared. ……I'sa."

"——You meddler. If you talk in such a loud voice, I'll hear it whether I want to or not."

The Regular Guard who lightly jumped from branch to branch turned towards him.

"That's for the best."

"Hmph, I had no intention of letting my guard down from the beginning. Rather than that —— we're close."

Letting out a small breath, I'sa came to an emergency halt.

"……I'll praise you for not running or hiding."

A fearless smile rose up on her face.

About ten metres ahead in the gap between two especially large evergreen trees.

Just like a king sitting in his throne, the Yuugenshu glared at them boldly. It was as large as a lion. Within its body formed of dark purple mist, its crimson eyes shined fierily.

—— [Deploy • Emission] ——

In the direction I'sa indicated, the super heavy steel ball drew in on the Yuugenshu. It was a "puppet" granted her shinryoku so if it directly hit, it would crush the Yuugenshu's crystal.

But.

The steel ball passed through the Yuugenshu and simply formed a depression in the ground on the other side.

"Ehh……!?"

I'sa and Monica let out voices of shock at the same time.

.

■ ■ …… ■, ■ ■ ■ …… ■, ■ …… ■, ■ ■ ■, ■ ■ …… ■ ■, …… ■ …… ■ ■

Oe/ Dia = U elfa clar, deus mille phes thes, deus mille hypn noa thes.

.

Little by little, the Yuugenshu's body began to tremble. The mist shrouding that body let off an eerie light and gradually spread to the surroundings. ——No, it was expanding.

"The Yuugenshu's mist is increasing……it's getting larger!?"

"That wrong. This is"

Staring at the strange beast from the front, Sheltis muttered softly.

The dark purple mist shimmered like a heat haze and formed an image like a mirage. Another mist was born from within the mist, forming another body.

"It's multiplication."

Seven monsters' crimson eyes shined. No,

"I'sa, there's another one to the rear!"

Crish. The sound of the Yuugenshu's claw ripping something to shreds echoed vividly.

"……Don't underestimate me, you monster!"

Bearing a wound on her back, I'sa manipulated her puppets. Two shining steel balls closed in from directly to the side and crushed the Yuugenshu that had just injured her into little pieces from the left and right.

The annihilated Yuugenshu became a dark purple mist. ——There was no effect on the remaining seven.

"Illusions that also have physical properties……you sure can do it."

The puppeteer girl stood up while grimacing from the wound on her back. Rather than being from the wound on her back, it was more an expression of irritation that a single attack from her puppet didn't work.

“It is a Yuugenshu that I have little data on as well. Be careful.“

“——It doesn’t change what we do.”

The twin blades reverse-gripped in his hands let off light in the forest that was dyed deep red. The mysterious purple of the blades was formed by having mateki permeate the azure Hyouketsu crystals, resulting in a wondrous color.

Bathed in Monica’s shinryoku, her crossed rods <Rosario> were wrapped in a silvery white layer of crystal.

I’sa steel balls once again flew high.

.

Then the three people and eight beasts collided head-on.

.

“——Haa!”

Ahead of anyone, Sheltis took aim at and ran towards the eight Yuugenshu.

Two from the flanks and two from the center, a total of four of them were approaching him. From within the dark purple mist, eerie limbs and claws extended——

From the front, directly to the side, underneath, above, behind; many claws were aimed and launched at every blind spot. He dodged, parried and blocked every one of them.

Djidii. He dodged the Yuugenshu’s claw that grazed his bangs by jumping.

A sword flash.

Not letting the opportunity to strike slip, the dual swords mowed down the surrounding two Yuugenshu.

“——Two down.”

“Not yet.“

Not even allowing time to breath, machine crystal <Ilis> shone.

——Shinggg!

In the next instant, Sheltis stopped three Yuugenshu coming from the sides with his sword. At a separate location, I’sa was engaging two of them and Monica was taking on two at the same time……seven? There were nine Yuugenshu if he counted the two he’d just defeated. They had increased from before.

“At the same time Sheltis defeated them, two new illusions appeared. If you put together the main body with the illusions, it seems the max is eight bodies but I think the illusions can spawn indefinitely.” [T/N: That is to say that Sheltis thought there were nine without actually counting. He just added the ones he defeated in, but those re-spawned already. In case that was confusing.]

“No way but to defeat the main body, huh.”

……Zuu……zuzuu……zuzuzu……

Decaying the ground and flowers, the misty beasts pushed on towards him at a crawling pace. Two of them were circling around to his sides and the two that had just formed jumped into the air.

——Which one is real?

The four bodies were just like reflections in a mirror. Moreover, the movements of the four were different from each other so it was troublesome. It would be easy to single one out if it was the only one taking separate action but there was no other way but crushing them one by one if all of them were irregular.

However, it was pointless to destroy an illusion because it would just come back.

"……There's no end to this."

"It means there's no point in beating the small fry."

Monica yelled from the rocks at the far back and I'sa yelled while leaping up to a large tree's branch. It seemed the two of them had also realized it. He could sense nervousness and impatience that wasn't there before.

"Monica, I'sa, ignore the illusions and go for the real one!"

Shouting to the two, he leaped backwards. Kicking off a large tree's trunk, he lept towards another large tree then kicked off that, staying afloat. In the blink of an eye, he had ascended to a height of roughly ten metres.

A bird's-eye view.

He looked down on them from a location where he could see all eight Yuugenshu.

"……As I thought."

He confirmed it once again after comparing the eight bodies. No matter how much their units were unmatched, the eight of them were attacking as if in competition.

——Strange.

If the real one was amongst the eight, then it would be over if they defeated that. If Sheltis was in the Yuugenshu's position, then he would station the real body at the innermost of the formation in order to avoid the one in ten thousand chance that it would take a hit. But there was completely no semblance of that amongst these monsters.

It was almost as if they were saying it didn't matter even if it the real one was taken out.

"Ilis, what's the possibility that the real one isn't amongst them?"

"Zero. The real one is certainly amongst these eight."

Machine crystal <Ilis> flat out denied it.

"My calculation area is certainly sensing the Yuugenshu's mateki. I can't confirm the exact location because of the illusions but the real one isn't a separate body."

“Then——”

……Zuu……zuzuu……zuzuzu……!

Two Yuugenshu were climbing their way up the large tree. There was no time to collect his thoughts. Feeling the quickly approaching killing intent, Sheltis jumped down to the ground.

“You’re in my way!”

Deflecting the awaiting two’s claws with his sword, he sprinted to open up distance with the Yuugenshu again.

——There are seven illusions. There’s one real body.

——But none of them are moving like the real body. As if they’re all the real body.

“That’s possible, huh.”

One. A completely outrageous hypothesis came to mind.

“Ilis, what if the Yuugenshu’s core crystal is transferring!?”

“……That’s a bold hypothesis. All eight are real but the core crystal controlling them is just one.“

The theory was just like I’sa’s “puppetry”.

Manipulating the illusions created from its own mateki. If it was a human, this would be settled by attacking the real one but the Yuugenshu were mist-form creatures to begin with. If they were destroyed without breaking the core crystal within, they would just dissolve in light. It might not affect the concept of the real body.

In other words, the box containing the core crystal was the real body and it didn’t matter which box that was.

“If it looks like the core crystal is going to be destroyed, then that core crystal will transfer to another illusion. After that, that one will act as the real spawn and spawn illusions——“

“What’s the probability?”

“There’s enough value to be worth confirming. But it’s a hassle.“

That’s right, if his conjecture was correct, then the only way to defeat this Yuugenshu would be before the core crystal transferred —— all escape routes would have to be sealed.

In other words, the destruction of all eight bodies at the same time.

“……It won’t be easy.”

He naturally put power into his hands that gripped the dual swords. The range of his weapon was this at most this short. Three……no, he had the confidence to take out four at the same time. More than that was a bet. That’s why he abandoned the notion of protecting himself and went for a suicidal attack for six.

“——Kuu!”

Monica was being pressed into a defensive battle by two bodies.

Due to the blessing of the shinryoku silvery white crystals on her crossed rods <Rosario>, her weapon held great offensive power against Yuugenshu. But the problem was her technical ability to handle that as a Guard. Even if she could handle apprentice Priestess’ spells, even Monica was still a Cadet Guard.

“There’s no end to this……”

Passing through the space between large trees, I’sa skillfully widened the gap with the Yuugenshu by flitting through the branches.

It was possible to control up to four steel balls at once with her puppetry, but the weakness was that their movements would become monotonous. In her previous two-man cell, that was the reason Sheltis could cleave the steel balls regardless of it being the first time he’d seen them. By the same token, the Yuugenshu were gradually getting used to the steel balls’ movements.

“……It’s no good.”

He gave up on the idea of taking out eight bodies with three people. Right now, the communication required to match up their timings would be difficult. The two who were in a defensive battle didn’t have that leeway.

……Think; isn’t this something you decided yourself.

……What I can do for the unit.

.

“Those with the leeway to observe their surroundings during battle probably consists of only you. ……It’s a shameless thing to ask but I’d like you to decide the commands for everyone to respond well. I would like you to give orders.“

.

The thing he had thought up with Kagura and resolved himself to.

He would support Monica, who was embracing her responsibility as unit leader, on the battlefield.

“Ilis, how many ways can you think of to dispatch the illusions?”

“……Only one conventional method. As you know, a shinryoku barrier’s territory is confining.“

Barrier spells, in other words, the widespread release of shinryoku. Like Hyouketsu Kyoukai —— it could weaken the mateki of the Yuugenshu within.

“However, Sheltis, for that, you——“

Machine crystal <Ilis> said something but held back.

“I won’t do that.”

Raising a laugh with traces of self-mockery, Sheltis directed his gaze at the other two.

There were numerous cuts carved into their formal wear. Being continually pushed by the Yuugenshu's fierce offensive, these were the wounds from that harsh battle. Amongst those were some considerably deep lacerations.

Both of them were also tired.

I can't let them push themselves. ……That's why it's best if I'm decisive.

.

"You are not used to battles where you receive support."

"But I would like you to adapt to it. We require your support and you will make the best of our support —— that kind of battle style."

.

……Kagura also spoke trivially of it.

……But if that is my role.

"I'sa, Monica! Enclose the Yuugenshu in a barrier after forty seconds!"

Erasing his slight self-deprecating smile, Sheltis looked at his two comrades and shouted. The two girls and even the Yuugenshu paused for a moment at the sudden loud voice. Using that opening.

"Monica, how wide can you open a barrier spell!?"

"Eh, ah……? W-what do you——"

"Never mind that, just hurry!"

"I-if it's a circular shape, up to a radius of twenty-two with a height of seven metres! I can reliably expand it to twenty metres with a height of nine metres!"

Monica yelled with a slightly red face. Beating only the approximation of twenty metres into his head, Sheltis continued to yell.

"First, Monica, erect a shinryoku barrier with me as the center. It's enough if it's twenty metres!"

And to the puppeteer girl.

"I'sa, deploy all four of your puppets at the same time! Set them up at the four corners of the barrier and obstruct the Yuugenshu that try to escape."

"Wha!?"

The two shinryoku practitioner girls widened their eyes in tandem.

“Wh-what are you saying! Sending away all of my puppets……it’s the same as being naked to a puppeteer! It’d be the same as being defenseless!”

“The same for me. I’d have my hands full just erecting a large-scale barrier……”

Deploying a shinryoku barrier and even setting out a net to prevent escape. However, for the girls, focusing on only that was a thought close to being defenseless.

But he once again conveyed his idea with renewed conviction.

“I want to limit the Yuugenshu’s illusions. Within the shinryoku barrier, even those illusions can be obliterated and its movements restricted. That’s some only you two can do.” [T/N: "only you two can do" has "something I can't do" written beside it.]

“……Wait, we can’t defeat the Yuugenshu by just enclosing it in a barrier.”

Taking on I’sa’s piercing identification head-on, he slowly nodded.

“I’ll take over after that.”

The ones who would wipe out the illusions after restricting them in the barrier would be Monica and I’sa.

Sheltis would have a direct showdown with the Yuugenshu within that barrier.

“……Okay. It doesn’t look like there’s any other way.”

The first assent came from the direction of the girl who was allowing her sakura-colored hair to flutter.

“……Being ordered by a Cadet Guard……but it’s fine.”

Seeing Monica returning her crossed rods <Rosario> to their holders, I’sa also once again let a smile rise onto her face.

“I’ll return the debt from Maha. I’ll owe you nothing with this.”

Then the three moved without a word.

—— [Deploy • Emission] ——

I’sa who deployed her puppets in four directions and Monica who was forming the spell jumped back. This was because they would otherwise be drawn into the battle that would be limited to within the barrier after its deployment.

Then——

.

[Sia Sec elis arc.....Is io miel]

[That day's dream, once more.....for the sake of that.]

.

Within the sea of trees dyed crimson, an azure shinryoku barrier was soundlessly erected.

The glittering particles of light danced in the air.

The azure shinryoku barrier. The light fragments that resembled Hyouketsu Kyoukai's crystals each had the power to oppose the Garden of Corrupted Song <Eden>'s curse.

——Those two are already outside of the barrier.

Zaa……zaa……

Without hiding the sound of his footfalls, he prepared the swords in his hands and drew in.

"————————!"

The mist beast howled in a strange voice. The seven illusions were negated by the shinryoku barrier and its body gave off sputters of black mist.

"……Are you taking damage from the shinryoku barrier?"

The beast did not answer.

But the strength within its eyes that had been there until now was gone and its movements were clearly lacking.

"……I see."

Looking at that, Sheltis weakly shook his head.

.

"Me too."

.

The dark purple smoke was also coming off the boy's body.

That body which housed mateki from falling into the Garden of Corrupted Song <Eden>. In exchange for nullifying the mateki of Yuugenshu, this body would take damage from the shinryoku that people were supposed to possess.

……I knew that I would take damage within a shinryoku barrier.

But he had had Monica and I'sa erect the barrier while prepared for that. That was his role. Without that resolution, he would not be able to be a member of the unit.

"Perhaps there's not a single difference between you and me. ……I might not have the qualifications to speak on what people are. However"

On his back and neck and his entire body, every spot was inflicted with burn wounds. As if to show that, the boy drew near the beast step by step.

"……Even so, I wish to return to the place of those waiting for me."

He raised the shining blades that were facing each other.

Then——

The boy's dual swords shattered the Yuugenshu's core crystal this time.

"……"

From outside the barrier shining with azure light, Monica was staring fixedly at its interior.

……What's going on right now?

With the barrier shining and the sea of trees and thickets added in, she completely couldn't tell what was happening inside. She wondered if Sheltis who was left there was alright.

She knew his skills but his opponent was still a Yuugenshu.

Immediately after, the vague shadow of a person wavered from within the barrier.

"Sheltis!?"

She ran with her breathing in a mess to the boy who walked out of the barrier.

"! Those burns……were you bathed in mateki!?"

"Ah, no, I'm fine."

The boy acted bashfully.

"These burns are……from yesterday's dinner when I messed up the strength of the gas burner."

She wondered if something like that happened during yesterday's dinner. Putting that aside, his expression as he slightly averted his face seemed somehow very……lonesome.

——I don't want to see Sheltis with that kind of expression.

The moment she thought that, her chest tightened painfully.

“Idiot.”

Monica placed her head against shoulder and closed her eyes. She didn’t want to see that bitter expression. If he was safe, then she wanted him to be lively.

“Don’t make……that face.”

“Eh?”

“……Don’t make the captain……worry so much, you scoundrel.”

Was it because she was relieved Sheltis was safe?

What was this. The heat within her chest was irrepressible. As long as she couldn’t put it into words, she entrusted herself to his shoulder——

“Unit captain Monica? Indiscrete relations within the unit is the largest demerit.”

Having I’sa whisper into her ear, Monica sharply returned to her senses.

“Y-you’re wrong! You’re wrong, examiner, th-this isn’t”

“Hr—m?”

Even if she was the examiner, she was just gazing over with a deeply meaningful look.

“Well, whatever, at present we’ve defeated the Yuugenshu. Next, we’ll go to Nash”

“No, please wait.“

The gem attached to a pendant at Sheltis’ chest —— machine crystal <Ilis> twinkled.

“It’s strange. Even though we should have defeated the Yuugenshu, the mateki response hasn’t disappeared.“

“……What did you say?”

“I’m currently in the middle of observation but……this is……dangerous. It is approaching the two from our unit and those of the injured unit at a high speed.“

He doubted his ears at machine crystal <Ilis>’ words. That couldn’t be since Sheltis had defeated the real body and as proof, the illusions had disappeared.

“There were two Yuugenshu from the beginning……we’ve been had; the Yuugenshu was possessed by another Yuugenshu. You could even call it parasitism.“

——If that was so, then another part also became understandable.

Those seven illusions were not simply the result of the Yuugenshu’s battle-use mateki. It had been a disguise to hide that there were multiple mateki responses. ……But in that case.

“The Yuugenshu is heading towards Kagura and Vaiel!?”

Part 4

Without forewarning, that appeared before them.

.

“……Oi, this ain’t no joke.”

Feeling the pressure of that from up close, Vaiel felt shivers run through his whole body.

Yuugenshu.

Carrying the ability to decay whatever they touched, the invaders from the Garden of Corrupted Song <Eden>.

“Don’t screw with me; I didn’t hear nothin’ about this! The examiner or the unit captain, what happened to those guys that were crazy worked up!? You telling me they all got done in!?”

“——No, I can’t imagine the group of three including Sheltis was done in.”

The one who answered was Kagura. But the lips that were peeking up from under her machine helmet were pale and that tone that seemed calm at first glance was shaking with fear everywhere.

“It probably ran away to here.”

“Isn’t that the same thing!……damn it, what do we do about this guy!”

It was the first time the iron fist protectors <Knuckle Dusters> he wore on both arms felt so unhelpful. It was a fear of death that he hadn’t felt from any gathering of valiant men in the unit battles. That was just how “real” the beast before his eyes was.

A real Yuugenshu.

It was a strange existence that would be rare for a Cadet Guard to fight, let alone even encounter.

……On this side are me and this Kagura. And behind are the four injured members of a unit?

……Like hell there’s a way to win.

“Oi.”

Even while backing away quickly, he whispered to Kagura who was standing directly beside him.

“We’re grabbing those four and running; fighting with those absurd bastards isn’t sane.”

“……”

The girl didn’t reply. It was like she didn’t even hear him.

“Oi, you listening? Oi!”

“It’s futile. Running away with these four by ourselves? While we do that blockheaded act, we’ll get wiped out in one shot by mateki.”

“Then what the heck are you saying we do!”

But the girl once again fell into silence and didn’t answer.

“Damn brat, are you only powerful in times of peace!? You——”

……Zuu……zuzuu……zuzuzu……!

Without the time to speak more, the Yuugenshu moved, leaving traces of decay along the ground. Their eerily shining crimson eyes were locked onto them without a doubt.

——This is bad.

The mist beast jumped at Vaiel whose reaction was slow, lunging at him as if leaning.

.

Light filled his vision.

.

Being hit from a very powerful light from the front, the Yuugenshu stiffened.

What made him realize that it was a flash bullet from Kagura was the resounding noise of a small machine having fallen after being tossed high into the air.

“…… “

Wrapped in wrath that seemed to freeze the atmosphere, the Yuugenshu turned around.

“I didn’t think my machine helmet’s eye shield would become useful in a place like this.”

Once again, the small clattering sound of something light hitting the ground.

The machine helmet the girl had removed was rolling around on the ground.

“Now, this way!”

And then she added a shot, she now took out the medium range-use stun gun and shot it after turning towards the Yuugenshu. There was no way it would work but if that single shot made the Yuugenshu feel like it “received an attack”, then that was enough.

“……Oi, what are you”

His eyes not working because he’d been bathed in the flash grenade at close range, Vaiel was staggering.

……I don't get the meaning of this.

……This brat, challenging Yuugenshu like this……does she have a death wish?

"Stop, you idiot! Playing around like that"

"I'll be targeted? It would be troubling if that didn't happen."

"——!?"

For a moment, he truly doubted her sanity.

"I will lead the Yuugenshu away to the best of my ability. If I buy enough time, Monica and the others will make it in time."

Replying indifferently like that, the girl rode atop the machine pearl <Machina>.

……Oi, don't tell me this brat.

……In order to let me and the four behind me escape, she's becoming……the bait……?

"Wait up, damn you! Such an arbitrary"

"The one who invited you to the unit was me. My responsibility……it is my duty to ensure that you are safe."

The floating machine pearl <Machina> let off a noticeably brighter shine. Halting its functions as a computer, it was concentrating all its output on propulsion as an escape pod.

"……Kuu……wha……what arbitrary"

His eyes couldn't see well because of the flash bullet so he could barely stand up. While he couldn't do anything, and while he couldn't stop her.

"——If I come back alive, let's do our best in the unit again, okay?"

Even though he shouldn't be able to see anything.

Her smiling visage was vividly burned into his vision.

.

And once again, the forest returned to silence.

.

There was nothing in his vision that had finally cleared up.

Not the Yuugenshu nor the figure of the girl who fled far away to lead that Yuugenshu.

"……"

He wordlessly tightened his fists, then.

“Ddddoo……ooon’t screw with meeeee!”

Vaiel roared.

The Yuugenshu and Kagura actions, whichever one didn’t sit well with him. ……As he thought, it was just as he thought. Nobody and nothing understood. About everything, everything——

“A dream……you’re dreaming too much……what’s this about Monica coming to save you or Sheltis coming to save you.”

There weren’t just those convenient events.

A Guard is a Guard. They weren’t like those heroes that came up in stories that would come running to someone’s predicament.

“……You’re wrong……that’s wrong.”

There was nobody like that in reality. There wasn’t so somebody, somebody there would have to defend them in place of a hero. Even a man with no redeeming features had times where he would have to rise up.

Wasn’t that so as a human and as a Guard?

For example, that day when he piggybacked a girl that had collapsed in the desert.

“Have I met you before?“

“No idea.“

At that time, Vaiel had acted as if he didn’t remember. He didn’t like gaining debts of gratitude or having words of repayment spoken.

“……Damn it, that brat……causing people nothing but trouble……I’ll hit that joking face of yours and make you remember.”

He bit down on his trembling lips and gripped his quivering fist tightly.

His feet ———— forward ———— forward.

Forward.

“That’s why……until I come to hit you……don’t die.”

Part 5

“Kagura! Hey, Vaiel! Kuu……”

Yelling into the communication device, Monica’s face was unpleasantly strained.

——There was no response from the two.

“……”

Looking at the side profile of Monica whose face was unpleasantly distorted, Sheltis wordlessly tightened his fists.

They had ran and ran and ran with all their strength through the sea of trees.

Even then, the anxiety within their bosoms would not be quelled. Disregarding people like Monica who had a special background, it was exceedingly difficult for a Cadet Guard to win against a Yuugenshu.

Then did they run? No, Nash’s injured were still there. He didn’t think they could escape a Yuugenshu while carrying them.

Other than somebody sticking himself or herself out and holding back the Yuugenshu, there was no way to save everyone.

But just who could do such a dangerous act?

Kagura? Or perhaps——

“He would help someone when they were truly troubled. ……She came to think that.“

“Shel-nii, you know. Yuto was treated really gently by Vaa-nii!“

“There are two qualities in a Guard. There’s a need for at least one guy like that around.“

Why.

Why am I remembering only these kinds of conversations now?

.

“There’s nobody else who will do it other than me; that’s all it is.“

.

……Vaiel.

A ruffian and a sloth. That kind of loathsome Cadet Guard. He had also thought that to begin with.

But that was wrong. Yuto, Kagura and the Instructor had told him.

……This might just be my wishful thinking.

……But Vaiel, please help Kagura.

Part 6

——Tosaa.

The sound of something touching the ground. What Kagura heard was the sound of her body hitting the ground.

“……Ah.”

She could taste earth upon her lips. It probably got in when she fell face-down.

Even though she wanted to wipe away the dirt in her mouth, her hands and feet couldn’t move at all from the intense pain.

Her hands and feet that had been bathed in mateki —— she was too scared to look to see what was happening to them. Even though she couldn’t feel anything with her fingertips, only the pain was resounding noisily like a roar. Whether it was necrosis or burns, their seriousness appeared to have a paralyzing effect.

……Zuu……zuzuu……zuzuzu……!

The sound of the Yuugenshu’s footsteps that creeped along the ground was growing closer. Even if she couldn’t see it while face-down, it should be arriving soon.

——As I expected, it was limited to several minutes at the highest output.

The machine pearl <Machina> that had expended its remaining energy fell to the ground and she’d tried to escape on her own feet, but without passing even ten metres, she’d been bathed in mateki and ended up in this state.

“……Ah……haha……ahaha.”

Even so, Kagura laughed.

With her entire body corrupted by mateki, her consciousness fading and the Yuugenshu soon to be upon that location.

——As I thought, I can’t be like Sheltis.

I’m a support-type that could only devote myself to the rear even in the unit battles. That is an existence that differs from the goals of a Guard that places themselves at the front to protect the Priestesses.

.

“Don’t you ever think of harming my companions again!“

.

For she who was like that, it was her first time meeting the real thing.

While looking at Sheltis who challenged “Golden” Maha who was blocking his way, her eyes were stolen away despite being a Guard just like him. She made her resolve in response to that ability and spirit.

Just once was fine. She admired that which was not a supporting role.

Just like he protected me, I want to protect somebody. That was why she had tried to protect Vaiel and the injured unit of four.

——I'd be laughed at if they knew the reason……was this kind of thing.

Zuu……zuzuu……zuzuzu……!

The sound of the monster's footsteps which reached her ears arrived at her feet——

——It's over.

The instant she closed her eyes in fear.

"!" [T/N: There were a bunch of small ッ there, but they don't even make a sound, so it became like this...]

That suddenly jumped far back. A violent sound. It was the sound of the machine pearl <Machina> sticking halfway into the ground.

——Somebody threw the machine pearl <Machina> at the Yuugenshu?

The machine pearl <Machina> also had a thin armor of shinryoku applied to it. The Yuugenshu had taken evasive measures because it loathed that……she understood that much. But who did it?

"……She……lti……?"

No, that dual sword user wouldn't do something like this. To begin with, an acquaintance who brought to mind the savage image of throwing the machine pearl <Machina>……that acquaintance……no way————

A single person, just one, was there.

But……but……that shouldn't be……that man is……

"Don't underestimate humans, you black fur ball."

The Nell folk —— Kagura's ears which were much more perceptive than a human's certainly heard that voice.

"……This……voice is……?"

With her body unable to move, she forced herself to the limit to bend her neck and what she saw there was——

Not the puppeteer Regular Guard that was traveling with them as the examiner,

nor the girl with the sakura-colored hair who carried the crossed rods <Rosario>,

nor the dual sword-wielding boy who had fallen to the Garden of Corrupsed Song <Eden>,

.

"The one who's gonna hit and train that brat is me; a beast isn't welcome."

.

it was the young man with short golden hair and a sullen face.

"……Va……ie……l?"

Why are you here……why……didn't you run away, why, why did you come here alone? Why did you come alone without calling Sheltis or Monica——

"That's why you're a brat."

That was what he said first.

"……Eh?"

"Stupid, how stupid! What's this about Sheltis or Monica. Are either of them here? Did you really think they'd come to save you? What are you pointlessly trusting in; don't over-expect things of people."

Don't expect things.

Again, once again those words. The words he had said not too long ago with the two of them.

"Why……are you that cold?"

She thought he had come to help her, but why was he saying these words that thrust her away?

"I'm not cold."

"Then wh——"

"Don't have expectations of people; the ones people have expectations of are Guards!"

All of the words that were at the tip of her lips were blown away by that one speech.

"To begin with, you're pointlessly pretentious! What's this "It's my responsibility"……while acting like a good kid and saying "Let's do our best with everyone", when it comes down to it, you go on a suicide attack by yourself! Can you just not trust in your comrades, huh!"

"……Y-you……"

She didn't understand what he was getting angry at in front of her. Saying not to expect things of people, now he was getting angry about whether or not she could trust her comrades.

She just could not comprehend what he was trying to tell with him being like that.

"……Damn it……you still don't get it, you moron?"

He clicked his tongue loudly.

"Listen up, I'll only say this once!"

In order to gloss over something —— in order to hide his red face, he shouted.

.

“I’m here! You added me to your unit, so why can’t you depend on me, you damn brat!“

.

……That was to say.

That he really thought of himself as a member of our unit?

That he came running to save me?

“Bu……but……why”

Why so suddenly.

Because if he was that strong-willed, then he should have done so during the unit battles——

“For sure, you can’t call me outstanding as a Guard. Ever since I was scouted by the Instructor for some reason, it’s been a given that I’d skip training and I’d definitely avoid a battle with a Yuugenshu. ……But you know!”

He kicked off the ground.

Running away by myself while making somebody else, what’s more, a woman, the bait? That’s wrong, all wrong! There’s somebody collapsed in front of me. At times like that, even before being a Guard, there are things you just don’t compromise on as a person!”

Kagura remembered.

What he had said several days ago after the unit battles when he hadn’t protected her.

.

“Hold on, Vaiel, why didn’t you protect me even though you were in the interceptor role?“

“Protecting someone in this kind of safe match guided by regulations can’t decide a man’s worth. A man will only get involved and protect a woman in a large battle of life and death. That’s my belief.“

.

That’s right. He certainly said that.

Even though he said that, I didn’t believe in it.

……Even though I didn’t believe in it.

Even then, he came running. Just like he said.

“B-but……you can’t win……a Cadet Guard can’t”

“You’re noisy; who else is here? Is there a Regular Guard or Sennenshi here? Guards aren’t some kind of knight that appears when the princess is in a pinch. There’s no other way but for those there to stand their ground. That’s what you do as a Guard, as a person!”

“……”

He was vulgar, lawless, boisterous, pointlessly loud and thought everything was a pain.

Even then, he came alone, running until his breath was ragged to save me.

He told me to trust in my comrades.

……It’s frustrating.

……In the end……rather than me, he’s definitely closer to Sheltis.

Tears welled up in her eyes and traveled along her cheeks but she didn’t understand the reason for them.

But my heart can tell. I……wasn’t wrong.

……As I thought, this person……is someone who can’t leave others alone when they’re truly in trouble.

“What are you crying for?”

“I’m not c-cc……crying……I’m not crying!”

“Jeez. Whatever. Anyway, the brat at an age with no sex appeal should just shut up and watch. I’ll shatter its front teeth!”

“……How stupid; do Yuugenshu even have front teeth?”

Unable to even hide the tears in her eyes, Kagura suddenly smiled.

“……How noisy. ……That’s why I hate kids.”

Vaiel spat that out. His sour face tensed up.

And then he ran.

“Ohh, ohhhhhhhhhhh!”

Roaring to wipe away fear, he brandished his fists. If the iron fist protectors <Knuckle Dusters> which were shining azure from the shinryoku carved seal ceremony were to directly impact the Yuugenshu’s core crystal, it would be able to shatter it.

An instant.

In front of his raised right fist, the shine of mateki spread in a fan shape to protect the Yuugenshu.

The shinryoku-infused iron fist protectors <Knuckle Dusters> and the defensive wall that shone with mateki clashed.

“Whaaaa!?”

Having his fist repelled head-on, Vaiel’s large body floated into the air. It was the repulsion from having the two directly opposite forces of shinryoku and mateki collide.

“Vaiel!”

“……I-it’s nothing; I told you to shut up and watch.”

While using abusive language, he shakily stood up. He’d been blown back through the air several metres and fallen on his back but it seems his body really was sturdy. However——

The Yuugenshu rushed in before Vaiel corrected his stance.

Jyuuu……when the mateki that decayed all it touched and the formal wear infused with shinryoku met, it scattered a large flash of light.

“Guu……that hurts!”

Confused by the Yuugenshu’s approach, Vaiel jumped away.

His right shoulder —— the formal wear’s fibre had been decomposed leaving a large hole, and the surrounding area was dyed red. There was also a limit to the formal wear’s carved seals. The Yuugenshu had eaten away where the shinryoku armor had been destroyed by mateki.

“……You!”

Defending his wounded right arm, this time he threw his left out.

But the result was the same as before. Repelled by the Yuugenshu’s defensive wall, he was attacked before falling and a part of his formal wear was corrupted by mateki.

“……This……bastard.”

His left leg’s knee dyed with blood, Vaiel used his left hand as a support and stood up.

“That’s……just perfect……”

His leg injured, he moved at a speed closer to walking than running.

This time —— the Yuugenshu didn’t really have a sense of caution. It just awaited the man approaching it and deployed the defensive wall to meet the swung fist.

.

That repeated itself many times.

.

Vaiel was blown away by the defensive wall and smacked into the ground. She didn't know how many times it had been. And this time, he didn't quiver as he laid face-up.

"……Vaiel? I-it can't be. Vaiel, Vaie――――"

"You're noi……sy; I can……hear you."

The voice was hoarse as if spewing blood and if it wasn't Kagura who came from the Nell tribe, one might have missed it.

"……Just shut up……and watch. Damn brat."

With his entire body shaking a bit, he stood up. His bleeding right shoulder showed no signs of letting up and the bleeding on his left leg had dyed up to his shoes in the color of fresh blood.

Lastly, his face was pale from losing blood.

"……St……stop……it……"

"Ahh?"

"Stop already! Please, I'm fine, so run already!"

Kagura shouted in a hoarse voice. She told him that it was enough. She was really happy that his spirit had not been a lie and his feelings to protect her. But……that was enough. She didn't want to see anymore.

"Please……you can't die. ……I'm happy you became a comrade but that's exactly why I don't want my comrade……to die."

However —— he didn't stop even then.

With tottering steps that a kid would laugh at and eyes that didn't see anything other than their focus, he swung his fist.

"Vaiel!"

……Why, why are you being so stubborn?

Even though it's fine if you choose to "run" instead of "fight" just once. Why won't you choose it? Why are you so set on saving me?

"……Have your eyes gone bad?"

"Eh?"

He indicated the Yuugenshu's defensive wall. But……she couldn't see. Because of the tears welled up in her eyes, her vision had already been severely obscured from a long time ago.

"There's a crack in his defensive wall."

Supporting himself against the large tree beside him, Vaiel stood up. Even though his injuries were heavy enough that he shouldn't be able to stand, there was strength in his voice.

"After one or two more……I'll punch out that damn fur ball."

"You're lying……that's a lie!"

"It's not a lie, there's really just a little left."

"Isn't that one shot painful!……With that beat-up body……you can't even walk anymore, right? Your arms and legs……they have necrosis, don't they!"

His burns were inflamed and his arms and legs were swelled to purple.

His formal wear's shinryoku armor was already unstuck and falling off. That was the result of someone who went to punch a Yuugenshu without protection by shinryoku.

He shouldn't be able to move; he shouldn't be able to stand. Kagura's body was currently decaying from being bathed in just one attack. Even now, she would immediately faint if she wasn't gritting her teeth and fall into a state where she wouldn't wake up.

"That why, please, ……please stop already. The one who invited you to the unit was me and the one who got you wrapped up in this exam was also me……I'll apologize for doing it at my convenience. Please, I don't want to see you hurt……for my sake anymore."

It was at that time.

He who had been looking only at the Yuugenshu turned his gaze to her.

It was a perfectly clear gaze. It was his true face that he hadn't shown her once until now.

"It's not your fault; I was the first one to start this."

"……Eh?"

"I carried a brat that had collapsed in the desert to the medical office. ……That's why you invited me to the unit, right? Then the cause is me, not you."

……

……No way……

He remembered me. That means he knew everything from the beginning and came along knowing that.

"……Liar. You lied about not remembering me."

"Like there's any way I could forget a brat who made me do something so annoying."

"……You're the worst; even at a time like this, your mouth is foul."

Not caring about her face getting dirty from the earth, Kagura pushed herself to wipe her tears away on the grass. All so she could watch over him from behind.

Vaiel advanced while dragging his feet.

With the hole-ridden formal wear that had lost its shinryoku armor, he dragged his necrosis-laden body that had received the mateki's curse and advanced. He moved his legs that shouldn't be able to move and tightened his fist that shouldn't be able to close.

"_____!"

The vigor that wouldn't become a voice shook the sea of trees.

Tightening his necrotic right fist to the point of breaking, he held it above him and brought it down on the beast before him.

Shinryoku and mateki. The two overlapped head-on——

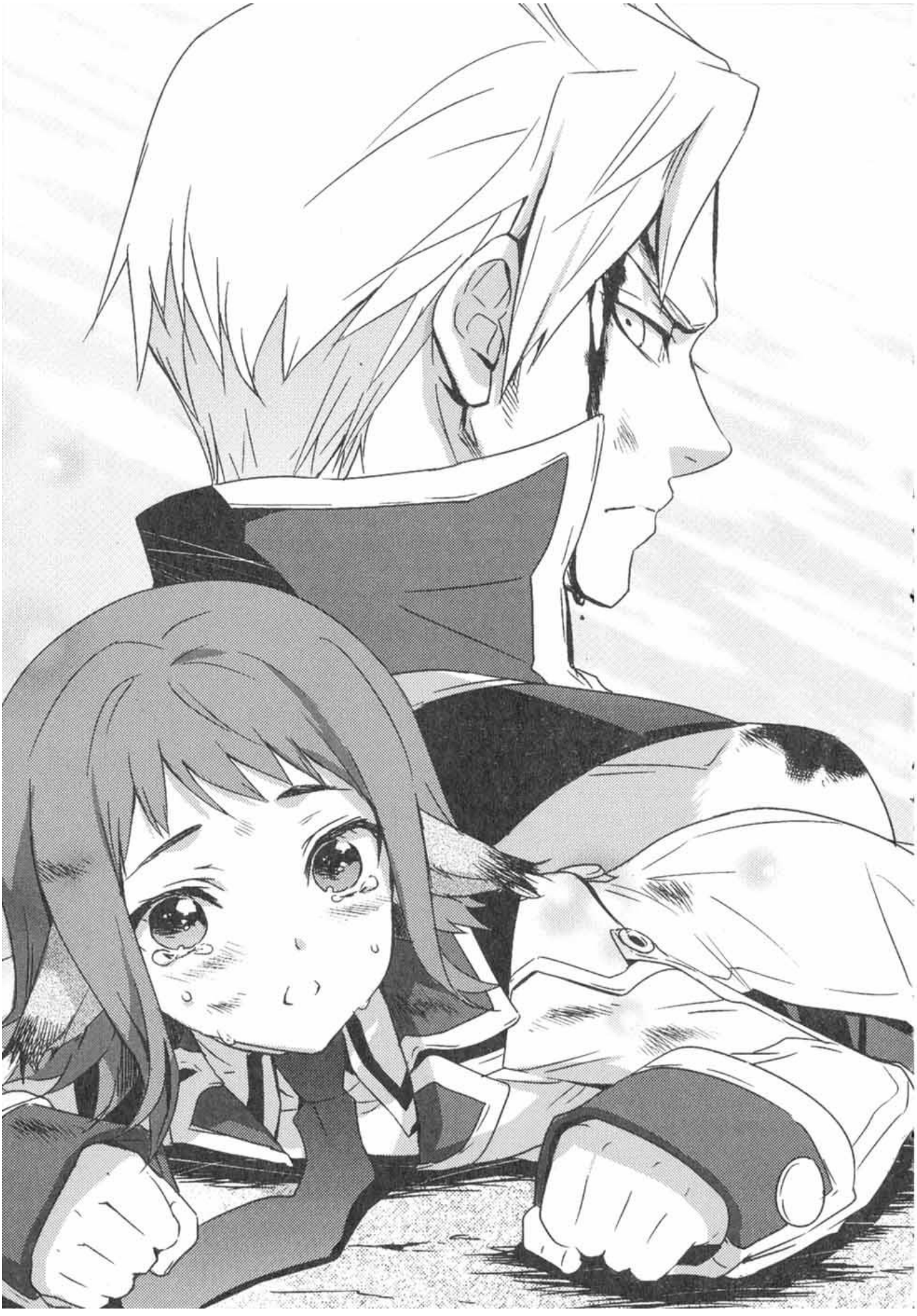
The iron fist protectors <Knuckle Dusters> and the defensive wall let off a clear sound and shattered.

"_____"

The Yuugenshu immediately made to repair the destroyed defensive wall and its mateki gave of brilliance.

But somebody made a move before that.

"Yo, black fur ball, I've got one warning for you."



Vaiel, who had completely lost his iron fist protectors <Knuckle Dusters>, clenched his right fist.

And then.

.

"Don't underestimate humans when they're serious?"

.

The young man who was just a human punched the Yuugenshu with that right fist.

Even though just touching the Yuugenshu's body would curse him and his right fist became inflamed all at once, it didn't stop. Passing the outer layer of mist, it reached the core crystal located at the center of the real body……and the sound of the Yuugenshu's core shattering certainly echoed.

"What's this……oi."

While hearing the death throes of the Yuugenshu that was disintegrating in light.

"That was an easy win, Yuugenshu."

An unusual smile appearing on his face, Vaiel collapsed right there.

Inside his fading consciousness.

"……I've been saved by you again."

The cheeky voice of a girl resounded strangely vividly.

Epilogue – Together

Part 1

——He awoke in the medical ward of Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>.

"You're awake?"

Closing the book she was reading, the female Instructor wearing a suit placed her knees together at the chair beside the bed.

"Rushing to gain achivements, this result isn't like you."

Nash remembered all he'd forgotten when Instructor Yumelda spoke those words.

"……Ending up in this condition from pursuing the Yuugenshu is laughable, isn't it."

While suppressing a low laugh, the intense pain of his injuries returned.

“How about the other three?”

“They’re in the middle of treatment at a different office. They’re at the regular office and you’re in the purification ward. You were the only one who was bathed in mateki so you’ll be hospitalized until the mateki response completely disappears.”

That was the reason he was wrapped in a shinryoku carved seal spell cloth from his neck to the tips of his toes.

“What are your impressions from your first fight with a Yuugenshu?”

“……The positions were the reverse of what I thought; if I said that, would you be satisfied?”

He had piled on Yuugenshu simulation training and never had a rough battle even against the mock puppets. But the opposite was true; that strange monster hadn’t broken a sweat against them.

“You need knack and experience to fight against a Yuugenshu. There isn’t an Instructor who thinks that Nash the Cadet Guard is weak but those who think it was rash are not few.”

“……I’sa the examiner as well?”

Saying so, his face tightened with a self-derisive feeling.

“What happens from now on is dependent on you guys.”

The Instructor continued to just chew her cigarette without lighting it. She placed the magazine under her arm and stood up, then walked towards the door——

“……I have no intention of it ending like this.”

Nash proclaimed while still lying down.

“……I……we absolutely won’t give up. Next time, we will magnificently claim indisputable victory ——— tell that examiner.”

“That attitude towards the examiner as well?”

“Add that too.”

“Then I’ll tell her; don’t disappoint us next time.”

Lifting the corners of her mouth fearlessly, the Instructor known for her demonic training showed a rare smile.

Part 2

At the medical office next to that——

“You stayed alive well; a person’s life force is amazing.”

“……You, don’t you have anything else to say?”

Vaiel glared up at the girl who had came under the pretense of visiting. This was the point where he'd like to grant her his fist if he could move but unfortunately his body had been wrapped in a spell cloth and lain down.

"I see, then —— thank you very much."

"……"

"Ahh, look, you just averted your eyes. I thought this would happen so I tried starting from something casual."

Kagura sighed. Her arms and legs were also wrapped in spell cloth but it seemed that the mateki curse was slight so there was no problem in walking around.

"Say, Monica?"

"Honestly, if somebody hadn't performed emergency purification, what would have happened?"

"……I'm telling you that was just pointless interference."

"If you have that much willpower, then you're fine."

Monica folded her arms and smiled wryly.

"Well then, Kagura, I have a report to make to the Instructor."

"Yes, see you later."

Seeing off the unit captain from the room, fuu —— Kagura softly exhaled.

"The removal of mateki has finished so I should be able to be discharged after a second check-up."

"……Hmph, a troublesome mission awaits after that."

Their competitor, Nash's unit, had defaulted, making the expedition to the Governmental Sector their mission. To start with, it was just another troublesome thing added to the mix for Vaiel though.

"Jeez. In the end, I have to take care of you brats."

"Ah, that's right. That made me remember. It's about the trade conditions from when I invited you before."

.

"I take it you are fine with me leaking your secret throughout Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>?"

"For example, yesterday at the storehouse next to the outdoor training grounds———"

.

"……You haven't leaked it to anyone, right."

"Yes, I won't say that you're secretly keeping a pet kitten behind the storehouse."

"! Y-you! The doctors passing by in the hall can hear!"

"It's okay, I made sure the door was closed. ……If someone as tough as you were to be known for keeping something as soft as a kitten, it would destroy your image, would it not?" [T/N: That's "soft" as in "softy" or someone who's really weak against cute (or the like) things.]

Vaiel decided to keep silent in response to Kagura who was nonchalantly talking.

"Do you like kittens?"

"……I don't like them; it's just because nobody realized it was weakening under the rain."

"Well, then let's leave it as that. At any rate, this is the extent of what I know of your secrets. I don't have anymore things to negotiate with. That's why"

The girl slowly drew near.

"This time is a request without trade conditions. Would you enter our unit? Not just for the Governmental Sector mission……the next one as well and the one after that too."

"……"

"I don't mind if you answer later. Well then, it will soon be my check-up time so I'll excuse myself here."

Towards her who was turned and ready to leave for her own hospital room.

"It's a three person unit riddled with brats. ……It'd be troubling if you ran off solo like this time so……that is, well……if I feel like it, I'll look after that."

Vaiel muttered with his face turned to the side.

"Really?"

"Men don't repeat themselves."

"I understand. I will inform Monica immediately. ——Yes, this is Kagura calling to inform you that the chef has just become a comrade. With this, we can also be relieved about the issue of the unit's culinary lifestyle."

Chef? He called for the girl who was speaking quickly to stop upon hearing a word he wasn't used to.

"……Hey, wait. What's that chef thing?"

"It's your role in the unit since you're the only one who can cook. Does it displease you?"

"Of course it does. Damn it, I look like an idiot for having actual expectations. Oi, it's null, null; I'll be taking back what I said earlier. I'm nulling what I said about looking after your troubles."

"Unfortunately, I actually finished registering your name under the unit yesterday."

“Th-that’s dirty! You guys submitted the application while I was asleep!? Oi, wait, I’ll cancel it, I……I won’t accept this, damn you!”

Part 3

Tenketsu Palace <Sophia>, floor 287.

Sheltis continually checked the time displayed on the elevator door.

“……I wonder if I’ve kept Ymy waiting.”

The promise with her was for XX PM. However, there was the report to the Instructor and the writing of the report on the specifics of the Yuugenshu they’d defeated. With the creation of that report, the promised time had passed by before he knew it. [T/N: Should I switch it with XX or use the original ○?]

The elevator stopped with the ring of a bell.

The space was filled with only silence. It was already lights-out for the Priestess-use floor and only the fluorescent emergency lighting faintly illuminated intermittently.

Tap……p……tapp……

Listening to his own footsteps, he headed to the promised intersection.

“Sorry I’m late.”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. Rather than that, I heard from Instructor Yumelda just before.”

Underneath the dum emergency lighting, her off-gold hair shone.

“We can go to the Governmental Sector together. ……I’m glad.”

Her face that had the purity of a baby smiled gently.

It was kind of embarrassing for Ymy to be so happy like it had happened to herself that Sheltis nodded with his face slightly averted.

“By the way, what’s up, was there something you were worried about?”

Today at noon. While he was in the middle of writing the report, Ymy had suddenly called him through an emergency line and said, “I want to see you.” She added on that today would be good because there was something she wanted to discuss.

“……Ah, ……umm.”

His childhood pressed down on the bosom of her vestment. Letting her gaze wander through thin air, she looked for words to describe what was within her heart —— it was that kind of trailing note.

“……Nope, as I thought, never mind.”

"Eh?"

"Originally, there was something I wanted to consult you about. Like about me……and about Priestesses. Also about the barrier and the Garden of Corrupted Song <Eden>."

The words mixed into her speech were all things that were serious points of discussion.

"It's okay, Ymy, don't hold back. I can listen to what you have to say all night."

"Thanks. But it's fine, really. Somehow……I felt relieved seeing Sheltis' face so I'll think about it more on my own. If I'm still anxious, I'll consult you. Also"

She began twirling a tuft of her off-gold hair around her index finger. Unchanged from their childhood, it was Ymy's way of hiding her embarrassment.

"Well, how to say this. It's been a while……since we went somewhere together."

"To the Governmental Sector? Ymy's going for negotiations and I'm going as a mission though."

"But it's a big step, right?"

"……Yeah."

Ymy was this happy that they would be traveling together to the Governmental Sector. It had been a screening battle that even turned into a fight against a Yuugenshu but it was worth it to see this smile.

"That's right. About Monica,"

"Ah, that's right! I'll also be able to go with Monica-senpai. ……How was senpai?"

Monica had just walked out on Ymy without saying anything before.

"Be at ease. It looks like she really was just embarrassed and had wanted to report to you after becoming a Regular Guard, but she was flustered because she'd been seen before that. It's just like Monica."

"……I see. That's great……I was wondering what I'd do if Monica-senpai hated me."

His childhood friend sighed in a grand expression of relief.

Seeing her shoulder relax after having been bunched up with tension, she had probably been pretty mindful of it.

"Is she that important of a senpai to you?"

"Of course! She's really kind and good and looking after others and her reliability is……is……"

Saying so, Ymy's expression froze over.

"Th-that's no good! As I thought, I can't say anymore! I'll become disadvantaged!"

"……Disadvantaged?"

What did she mean?

Even though he tilted his head, Ymy's face went bright red.

"She-Sheltis shouldn't pay it any mind! Rather, you can't, you're not allowed to!"

"Ehh, again!? Ah, wait, Ymy, why are you running!?"

"Sheltis, you idiot————!"

Afterword

People's resolve can weave the heavenly melody.

.

Thank you very much for picking up this book, I'm Sazane Kei.

How did you enjoy Eden volume 4? Volume 3 was an epic showdown between the main character <Sheltis> and the Golden Spell <Maha> so I tried to draw volume 4 in line with the idea of a "life-sized person". The compositions of volume 3 and volume 4 became completely opposite but I wonder if the impressions given at the end are similar?

With the main characters also making a first appearance and the happy accident known as a drama CD, I feel like I'm being pushed on and that I'd like for the story to start running all-out.

……And with that.

Like I just announced, "Eden's" drama CD has been finalized!

Sazane himself was surprised, but this is all —— all thanks to the editors, K-san and Kasukabe Akira-san, and above all else, all the readers who have taken this book into their hands.

After this, the drama CD's information will be released in Dragon Magazine and on Sazane's blog and there are also plans for it to be featured on the producer, Marine Entertainment-sama's homepage. Key points, check!

.

Next Volume Preview

Frozen……I have always……always awaited you.

Now, Sheltis, please chase after me <nothing>. That will be the beginning of everything.

.

Representatives from both organizations gather at the Tenketsu Palace <Sophia> and the Governmental Sector's assembly.

The Priestess representing the tower, Ymy, and the Cadres Guard, Ishtar. And Sheltis once more heads to the Governmental Sector as an escort together with his comrades.

Ymy attends the assembly. On the other hand, Sheltis gets a glimpse of the secret the Governmental Sector is hiding.

However, there lies another shadow of the “uninvited”——

.

Well then, let us meet once again in December in “Hyouketsu Kyoukai Volume 5, Absolute Sanctuary”.

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